

Two Cosmopolitan Friends: Tagore and Cousins

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Abstract

The word cosmopolitanism has different connotations. According to the philosophical cosmopolitans, who are also designated as Moral Universalists, there does not exist any boundary between nations, states and cultures, as they believe all human beings to be fellow citizens and compatriots. This article attempts to address the cosmopolitan ideas of Rabindranath Tagore and James H. Cousins. Moving beyond the parochial notion of nationalism, both Tagore and Cousins adopted the notion of universalism that assimilates all cultures, races and religions under the broader category of Humanism.

[**Keywords:** Tagore, Cousins, friendship, universalism, humanism]

The definition of cosmopolitanism has its varied perspectives. A person who adheres to the idea of cosmopolitanism in any of its form is called a cosmopolitan. But the philosophical cosmopolitans are moral Universalists. Boundaries between nations, states, culture and societies are indeed irrelevant in terms of morally accepted notion of cosmopolitanism. In our discussion, cosmopolitanism shares some aspects of universalism, namely the globally accepted notion of human dignity that must be protected and enshrined with the internationalism instead of nationalism. So, cosmopolitanism, in terms of morally accepted value, has been widely used to signify a wide variety of important values in moral and socio-political philosophy. It appeals to universal reason and treats individuals as similar units with legal consideration irrespective of their particular nationality and citizenship.

Rabindranath Tagore's understanding is that, though colonialism steers to nationalism, it has its own boundaries, which must be overcome to acquire a larger citizenship of the world. He persists beyond nationalism and his closeness towards internationalism predominantly has its ethics and acceptability when the individual is located in the universal domain. Tagore's literary works also reflect his philosophy of universal humanism. It is Tagore's wide travels in almost all parts of the world that led him to think beyond the mere national for a global co-operation of all the nations. Through his establishment of Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan, he tried to strengthen this notion of 'Universalism': *Yatra visva bhabatyek nidam*, that is, 'where the whole world would find a shelter'. He wandered to different countries in the west and had rightly understood that co-existence of scientific advancement in the West and traditional culture of the East might have a positive effect in the resurgence of true humanity. Though he was a patriot, he believed and felt that co-existence of cultural and spiritual

enlightenment along with the scientific ecstasy of the West could bring about an all-round progress and universal brotherhood. He was really in quest of union of all cultures in one place to signify the meaning of universalism. In an answer of proposal for establishing a foundation of Christian culture at Santiniketan, Tagore wrote to Alexander Horace G. On 28.06.38

...My friends in the East have helped me lay the foundation of Zoroastrian, Buddhist and Islamic studies. The modest in their beginnings, I have faith in their future. The union of your culture will be a distinct contribution towards the progressive realisation of my ideals¹.

Hence, it becomes clearly evident that Tagore's concept of cultural nationalism crosses the exclusive trend of nationalism to a more liberal and universal approach. His understanding of nationalism was influenced by the ruthless British colonial rule in India and the latter's anti-colonial struggle for independence. His extensive tours in different countries and British rule in India gave him tremendous insight into the socio-political patterns and narrow interest of power within which western nations were restricted. The imperialistic thoughts embedded in the western nationalism were devoid of spiritual ecstasy. He strongly felt that nationalism finds its true meaning when self is not in subordination. He wrote at a time when a wind of strong anti-colonial sentiments and extreme nationalistic fervour was blowing all over his country He was optimistic about India's freedom and also felt the need of independence. But he believed that, a nation, which cultivates this moral blindness as a cult of patriotism will definitely meet with sudden and violent demise. The Poet stated:

... I take this opportunity of making it clear to all that I do not belong to any political party whatever, and that what I have to say to my Countrymen is not of the present moment or of the prevailing political unrest, I have never felt my attention for devising means to build machinery for extracting favours from unwilling hand, thus perpetuating the cult of moral servitude and making our people live in the most unhealthy mental atmosphere of continual alteration of hope and despair. It has ever been my endeavour to find out how to develop the power in ourselves by which we can truly earn the gratitude of all mankind and win our place as those who give out of their abundance and do not solely rely upon the doles of half-hearted clarity.²

James H. Cousins was greatly influenced by the philosophies and cultural heritage of the East. Governed by the ideals of humanism, he dedicated most of his time and energy to enrich and organize the cultural activities in India and represented India to countries like Japan, America and others as a lecturer of poetry. Rabindranath Tagore too with his philosophies, insight and idealism emphasized the legacy of humanism. He enriched the Indian cultural activities with his strong feelings, imagination and realization. His deep intention was to unite world culture into a single place from where world fraternity could have very clear reflection. So from this perspective, similarity of ideas between Tagore and Cousins may be found and these points of contact are explored in this article.

Dr. Cousins was born in Belfast, Ireland in 1873 and became popular as a poet of distinctive promise in the Irish literary circle in Dublin. James Cousins who was the poet and writer of cultural issues played a distinct role in the Irish literary revival of the late 1890s to early 1900s with W.B. Yeats and George Russell, known as A.E... In 1915 he left for India as the literary editor of *The New India* edited by Annie Besant and became one of the organizers of the Princely State of Travancore, where he headed the department of Fine Arts and English studies. Thus, he was in a privileged position to study the interactions between Western and Indian thoughts with a critical eye. Cousins were much appreciated by the Indian philosopher and social activist Sri Aurobindo who was an attentive observer of Western evaluations of Indian culture. He also took keen interest in cultural topics and started studying philosophies of India with great interest. . He became so enchanted with the philosophies and enriched culture of India that interaction between his Celtic imagination and environment of the sub-continent resulted in the poetry, full of spiritualistic and aesthetics. His enthusiasm for the work of the painters of the modern Indian revival took him all over the country with lectures and exhibitions. He organised Picture Gallery, called Chitrasala in the Jogan Mohan Palace for the Maharaja of Mysore. Dr. Cousins has been the President of Madanpalle College in Madras Presidency since 1933. In 1934 he was given the ancient Sanskrit title of Kulapati that is Teachers of Multitudes by South Indian Teacher's Association. In 1935 he organised the Travancore State Gallery of Asian Painting, for which he was awarded the Veera Sringhala, the meaning of which is Bracelet of Prowess and a Pundit's shawl by his highness the Maharaja, coveted distinctions of which he is the first European recipient. All these activities clearly reflect his close association with the Indian culture as well as its traditional cultural heritage.³

Being influenced by his father's rationalism, spiritualism and aestheticism, Rabindranath Tagore moved to a tranquil place called Bhubannagar, from Calcutta his parental residence, a purchased land of twenty bighas from the Zamindar, Lord Sinha of Raipur near Bolpur. The place was later named as Santiniketan, the abode of peace when in 1863 Tagore's father Debendranath Tagore built 'Santiniketan' house there. Due to his strong abhorrence to the mechanistic mode of bookish education, Tagore, with his father's consent, founded at Santiniketan the 'Brahmacharyasrama', in the year, 1901, where education was imparted in the open-air, under the shadows of trees. Since then, Tagore with his lofty ideals was in the quest to uplift the cultural activities, as well as to assimilate the world cultures in his educational institution. In regard to cultural ideas, attitude and poetic virtues both Tagore and Dr. Cousins made their earnest effort to bring about Cultural Revolution that could truly strengthen the ideals of unity, integrity and universal-brotherhood.

Both Tagore and Cousins were the patrons of Art and artistic activities. Their correspondences clearly indicate that they possessed distinct ideas and

thoughts with very close proximities. In a letter to Dr. Cousins, on 14th November, 1915, Tagore wrote:

Our artists are subjects to from foreign criticism, especially from friendly advices. We must see things with our own minds- for art is not logical, like science or mathematics, it is extremely personal; its function is to express what universal truths there are in that highest mystery of creation. Happily, with regards to pictorial art, our minds are free as yet from barbed wire entanglements of fixed traditions, or those machine made enjoyments which are turned out of mere habits. I believe we shall truly be able to help the west if we only can resist her allurements or her browbeating. I do not mean to say that we have to turn the table and try to teach her ourselves – for teaching is not man’s proper business – our supreme object being to truly reveal ourselves. And art is one aspect of that revelation- a revelation freed from all necessity and from conformation to external and artificial standards.⁴

They also exchanged many literary thoughts and emotions in different times. Appreciating Cousin’s paper, the “Literary Ideals”, Tagore in a reply to him, wrote:

Literature reflects the writer’s outlook upon life- generally speaking, an Indian’s outlook is philosophical, and therefore philosophy naturally assumes a living form in Indian literature. When a European says he fully wants to live he does not mean to say that he wants to live the life of truth but that it is his wish to live the life of passion and his literature reflects his desire. It is not light that he wants but conflagration. He consumes himself and his world and the present war is the best illustration of that.⁵

With regard to love Tagore says ‘love’ is “*We find a joy which is ultimate because it is the ultimate truth*”. James Cousins who also defines love with the same spirit and understanding as of Tagore, believed that, the truth lies in ‘love’ with its eternal, aesthetic and universal value. Reiterating Tagore’s concept of the Ultimate Truth of Life, Cousins remarked:

...But this truth, so clearly seen by the English Tagore and the Indian Shelly, is not a mere postulate of sentimentality; it is seen as the eternal necessity, the inevitable logical condition underlying any intelligent thought of the universe. And what applies to that spirit as a self-existent Being, applies also to its operation within that restricted area of itself called the World.⁶

They were sensitive and reasonable in their friendship and co-operation. Tagore unhesitatingly sought help from Dr. Cousins. He was enthusiastic to exploit his experience on Agriculture and its activities in Ireland and other European countries. In a letter to Dr. Cousins, Tagore wrote:

I am sure you will be able to help our Visva Bharati by the experience you gain in your European tour. We specially want you to study for us Agricultural co-operation in Ireland and let us know how far its method can be adapted to our Indian condition. We shall be very thankful to you if you can persuade some experienced man who has worked with AE, to come and help us in our village

work for about six months and longer if it is possible .Of course on our side we shall be only too glad to offer to you the pecuniary help you need so much, the amount of which will be fixed in our committee meeting according to our financial capacity and communicated to you without delay.⁷

Having born in the Belfast in Northern Ireland into a protestant family Dr. Cousins moved towards south of the Ireland after the completion of his studies. Cousins joined with Yeats both as an actor and as a play- writer when in 1899, Yeats created the Irish Literary Theatre bringing together young writers and actors who can be actively associated in the national literary movement based on Irish history and folklore. Though their friendship did not last long, yet Cousins had a deep respect to Yeat's role in creating an Irish national culture. He wrote:

A national culture is impossible without the individual creative artist; the individual artist is important and unintelligible save in his relationship to his national culture. Where either tries to do without the other, degeneracy ensues nationally and individually...The true artist is the true patriot, speaking the language of eternity but in the vernacular of his own time and place...where art does not rise from authentic springs but is piped from distances by subterranean ways, it becomes troubled, muddied and at best only reaches a dull mediocrity. But the art that embodies the creative impulse of the universe, with high vision and deep emotion, in its own time and place and way, will by the force of its authenticity pass beyond these limits into universal appreciation.⁸

So Cousins, like Tagore, too went beyond nationalism and expressed his universal thoughts through universal appreciation of art. Though Tagore was twelve years older than Cousins, they had a strong friendship with each other and shared many common ideas. Tagore always wanted to introduce higher education in Visva- Bharati. In this regard he sought for such a person, who with his strong vision and farsightedness could successfully organize the educational activities at the institution. To him, Dr. Cousins appeared to be an appropriate person for this purpose.

In a letter to Dr. Cousins, on 11.11.25, he wrote:

... I cannot recollect at present any one who may so worthily fill the office of the Principal of our department of collegiate studies as yourself. May I know if your engagements would permit you to join us and help us at least for a year or two? I wish I could personally come to your place and fetch to you at Santiniketan but the journey may prove to be too heavy a strain in the present state of my health.⁹

Tagore failed many times to retain Dr. Cousin's request to visit Madanapalle in Madras Presidency for his hectic activities. But his heartfelt intention was to visit that place. In a letter to Dr. Cousins on 29.12.18, Tagore wrote him in such a manner that vividly represents their deep and intimate friendship. Tagore wrote:

Certainly this time I shall never fail to see you at Madanapalle. But my heart quakes to imagine what is waiting me at your Presidency, and I hope I shall be to

keep up my courage up to the last moment and take the final desperate step towards the south. Death's door is called the southern door in Bengal and I hope it won't claim me as a duely consecrated victim sacrificed to the myriad tongued divinity of the public meeting ... But should I not warn you not to put too implicit a faith upon my promises? Chanyaka advices never to trust women and kings, but I think poets should top the list of all unreliable.¹⁰

Being invited by Dr. Cousins, Tagore took a visit to Madanapalle, in South India, in the year, 1919. Arriving there he came to know that the adjoining areas were severely struck by the natural calamities and the people in the nearby areas had been the victim of gross damage by the natural calamity. His mind was deeply touched by the incident. Moved by the extremities of the disaster, he offered to deliver a special lecture in Madanapalle, in aid of the Relief fund. He also handed over a bank order which he had just received from Japan.

James Cousins with his wife Margaret came to Santiniketan on 4th October in 1921 and spent there for two weeks. Recollecting those blissful experiences of his living at Santiniketan, Cousins wrote:

A fortnight's visit to Santiniketan gave us the regeneration of spiritual and aesthetical uplift. We were put up in Rabindranath's former cottage, from which he had removed to a new semi-place (konarka), designed by Surendranath Kar. In this there was space for rehearsals of the poet's dramas under his own supervision; and our days and evenings went in joyful shuttling between our cottage and it. At any time that suited him we exchanged opinions on all kinds of high topics, and on his theme for creating an International University. But the chief of these occasions was one of the roof-talks, at which the staff and visitors assembled in the beginning of dusk, to listen to, and occasionally take part in, expositions of religious, philosophical, artistic and educational subjects by Gurudev. We all squatted around as we chose. On this particular occasion, he drew out some of the basic principles of the Upanishads, and took us behind cold terms and phrases to their realities. He gave us his idea of personal relationship with the life of the Universe. This could only be fulfilled through some kind of intermediary; Hence, the monotheistic religions, and the psychological reason for their existence. Our long, happy intercommunication was not the comparing of mind and mind, but of that deeper instantaneous stratum of consciousness, soul and soul. When, in the starlit silence, the exalted communion ended, and the rapt group quietly retired, it was some kind of pain to fall back into actuality. We had no words with which to jar the ecstatic with formal. All I could do, in signifying departure, was to touch Gurudev's feet; and Gretta[Margaret] kissed his hair.¹¹

In the year 1922, without giving any prior information, Tagore with C.F.Andrews met Dr.Cousins at Adyar in South India. His intention was to publish a quarterly Magazine, *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, to preach the ideals of Visva-Bharati. The discussion was made in a very congenial atmosphere and eventually *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly* was brought out as its debut in the month of April in 1923. In the very first volume of *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly* Dr. Cousins's article *Poetry and World-Problems* appeared. What Dr. Cousins

describes in the autobiography is very interesting and expresses his spontaneous devotion to Tagore:

The great figure in the door of our living room was in its usual fawn-coloured robe and high biretta-like cap. Above his longish gray beard and the nose of aristocracy he smiled through his clear brown eyes; and in his high voice began a literary and intellectual give-and-take that carried us on from 1.30 to 3.30.¹²

At that time Tagore recited the Song, *Jana-gana-mana* there before the festival- committee. Each and everyone present there became enchanted with the magical music of the song. Later on, Tagore translated the song as 'Morning Song of India' after he was requested by the people there. Dr. Cousins became overwhelmed and excited with joy when he went through the English translation of the National Anthem, 'Morning Song of India'. In a letter on 19.03.36 he conveyed his heartfelt cheer to Tagore. Later on in a letter on 31.10.36 Dr. Cousins commented:

... So you are 'frightfully famous' as a person once said of James Joyce; even if nobody but Mrs. Cousins and myself had thrills from realizing that the sentiment that accompanies the melody would, if translated into life, nullify the spirit behind military display and transform mass-design and movement into dynamic beneficence.¹³

Everybody was moved by the lyrics and the tune of the song and the Institution unanimously agreed the song to be the Prayer- song. On 23rd July in the year 1934 Cousins wrote a letter:

Every working morning jana-gana is sung by hundreds of young people in our big hall. We want to extend its purifying influence by sending copies of it to other Schools and Colleges and by making it known abroad.¹⁴

In 1936 Facsimile copy of Tagore's handwriting is published in the Memoirs-Pamphlet of the College. What is said about the song in that Pamphlet is very interesting.

Above is a Photographic facsimile of what will become one of the World's most precious documents... From Madanapalle Jana-gana has spread all over India, and is admired in Europe and America.¹⁵

In the same year the song was spontaneously cheered in Europe and America, apart from India. The next year, in 1937, a violent debate ensued in the lime-light when many dignitaries played a crucial role to select the Indian national song. That time a statement of Cousins was forwarded to the Newspaper. This statement indicated how the two great personalities co-existed with mutual spirit and understanding. Cousins felt that *Jana-gana*, being the national song of India touched the sentiment of Universal Soul. What Cousins wrote in that statement is:

My suggestion is that Dr. Rabindranath's own intensely patriotic, ideally stimulating, and at the same time world-embracing 'Morning Song of India'

(*Janaganamana...*) should be confirmed officially as what it has for almost twenty years been unofficially, namely, the true National Anthem of India. This real expression of aspiration for the highest welfare of a whole people...is universally known in the country. It has a tune and rhythm that make it signable with definiteness, unity and vigour ... In the victory of a particular nation or creed or class is the defeat for all; while the victory of the Universal Life, to which all may turn in terms of their own faith, is the victory all, and in that expression of allegiance to that Universal Life there is expressed, not the shifty sentiment of expedient tolerance, but the eternal law of unity in diversity.¹⁶

Cousins also raised his voice when controversy over the National Anthem took its ugly shape and logically placed *Janagana* over *Vandemataram* and in *Madras Mail*, on 03.11.37, expressing his strong views in favour of retaining *Janagana* as the National Anthem of India. He quoted:

... It has a tune and rhythm that make it singable with definiteness, unity and vigour, whereas the 'Vandemataram' tune can never be given a satisfactory mass-rendering as its twist and turns are only possible in individual singing.—*Janagana* specially recognises the diversity of human life in India, and gives it its true unification, not an impossible uniformity of externals, but the real unity that comes of mutual aspirations towards the universal life in which all share...¹⁷

In Tagore, Cousins found a man of higher capability, who alone could rejuvenate the lost spirit of India. Dr Cousins wrote:

Shortly you will finish eighty years of this life. Thank you for staying so long in this queer era of human history, if it is human, not sub-human. When incarnated spirits like you are on the planet, there is still a spark of hope for the race. Of course I read every line of your doings and sayings that go into the press; but sometimes I have a keen hunger to see you again in persona. This however is difficult, as I have many duties to fulfil, founding and developing art galleries and museums, building, cultural institutions, restoring an ancient palace that is a gem of indigenous architecture, sculpture, carving and painting; lecturing and writing.¹⁸

Both the personalities enriched India in such a manner that advancement of our culture and its stability co-existed with their sweet ties. Tagore with his versatile genius brought about an enlightenment in India, while Cousins with his intuition, generosity and flush of mind enriched India through his socio-cultural activities. He wandered different Universities, educational institutions in India and abroad as visiting professor but could not accept lucrative offer for permanent engagement. He was so intimately attached to the soil of India that he worked for long for cultural bondage and ecstasies. He heartily appreciated Tagore's endeavour to restore and conserve the creative works of art, emerged out from different cultural activities in India.

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