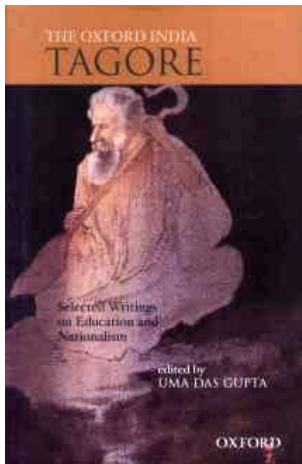


Book Received and Reviewed

The Oxford India Tagore: Selected Writings on Education and Nationalism

Edited by Uma Das Gupta



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The Poet as a Polemicist and a Prophet

“But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them.”

Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'

While Benjamin refers to this storm as 'progress', in the modern (and even in the postmodern) world many would see it as a replica of political nationalism, the Janus-faced monster, with its twin heads, the ideas of 'nation-state' and 'citizen-subject'. In a letter, dated 8 March 1921, to Jagadananda Roy, one among the first group of teachers to join Visva-Bharati, Rabindranath Tagore refers to this kind of nationalism as a *bhougolik apadebata*, a territorial demon. A careful reading of an excellent anthology of Tagore's *Writings on Education and Nationalism*, edited by Uma Das Gupta, in *The Oxford India Tagore* series, can enable the reader to form an idea as to how Tagore carried on his strife against this demon till the very end of his life.

Tagore believed in freedom, individual freedom and freedom for the

oppressed. Tagore also believed in the uniqueness of every individual. These beliefs of Tagore led him to protest against any kind of systematic standardisation of human endeavours. From his strong dislike for the aims and objectives of colonial education system, programmed to produce clerks, to his protest against Mahatma Gandhi's creed of the *charkha*, a mass of people blindly following a unitary principle; from his championing the cause of awakening *atmashakti* to his trenchant critique of the use of violence in achieving political independence—Tagore the polemicist as well as Tagore the activist always stood firm in his faith that each single individual is a unique creation of the Almighty. To him, it is for the best possible interest of all concerned that the individuality of each human being must not be curbed or moulded into a predetermined pattern but be given adequate opportunity to flourish to his full potential. It is this faith in the inscrutable marvel called 'man' that, like a common thread, binds many varied ideas and activities of Tagore. Among them are his foregrounding of *samaj* in the nation-building project during the imperial rule, his experiments in a holistic system of education through the establishment and development of Visva-Bharati, his theories and practice in rural reconstruction and most importantly his continuous attempts to outgrow any form of parochialism, be it nationalist or of other types. His ultimate goal was to arrive at an inclusionistic cosmopolitanism, a scheme of things in which the best and the greatest thoughts and achievements of both the 'East' and the 'West' be offered to the welfare of humanity. Uma Das Gupta, in this book, painstakingly anthologises a vast array of materials within a single cover. Spread across five sections, it has Tagore's autobiographical writings, his writings on education, his views, expressed through lectures, letters and articles and creative writings, on theories of nationalism which he thought as a western import, his attempts to diagnose the problems, social, political and economical, facing his country, the necessity to use modern science and the like. Professor Das Gupta, interestingly, in the last section of the book, decides to include a complete version of his last novel, *Char Adhyay*, Tagore's *tour de force* critique of the dehumanising tendencies inherent in a violent struggle for independence. The supremely lyrical nature of the novelette strikes a different note in the anthology. The choice of the materials and their arrangement helps us see clearly the organising principle, love for freedom and individuality, in a myriad-minded genius, perhaps so clearly, for the first time. Herein lies the success of Professor Das Gupta, in her choice of materials, almost impossibly varied and large, both in volume and scope.

In his Introduction to the Penguin edition of Tagore's *Nationalism*, Ramachandra Guha comments that Tagore's cosmopolitanism was, to a great

extent, a product of his family background. He quotes a letter that Tagore wrote to his friend Pramatha Chaudhuri in January 1885 in which he spoke of the tension in his own mind between the contending forces of East and West. "I sometimes detect in myself," he writes, "a background where two opposing forces are constantly in action, one beckoning me to peace and cessation of all strife, the other egging me on to battle. It is though the restless energy and the will to action of the West were perpetually assaulting the citadel of my Indian placidity. Hence this swing of the pendulum between passionate pain and calm detachment, between lyrical abandon and philosophising between love of my country and mockery of patriotism, between an itch to enter the lists and a longing to wrapt in thought." This ambivalence in Tagore's mind gets a rather refracted manifestation during the heydays of Swadeshi Movement. Tagore's participation in the movement in its initial phase was whole-hearted, to say the least. Poems and songs poured out from his pen. It is this productive period of his patriotic phase in his poetic career that made critics comment that Tagore sang India into a nation. But he withdrew himself completely from the movement when it took a rather violent turn and the key players of the movement failed to involve all classes and religious groups into it. Tagore became especially upset when in the name of boycotting foreign goods the leaders indulged in oppressing poor, Muslim peasants and small-time traders. After 1907 Tagore not only stopped participating in any political event; but he also started to spend most of his days in Bolpur, devoting himself completely to the cause of the development of his dream institution, Visva-Bharati.

After his series of lectures published as *Nationalism* in 1917 Tagore published *The Centre of Indian Culture* in 1919, his major treatise on the ideal kind of education for students of India, a country, plagued not only by an oppressive foreign rule but also by various other kinds of social evil. It is no mere accidental coincidence that Tagore decided to leave active politics and to concentrate on issues related to education and that his two major English publications, *Nationalism* and *The Center of Indian Culture* followed one another. Tagore, intellectually, was not only outgrowing the discursive liminalities of official nationalism but he also was gradually formulating his own theories of nation-building project, the ideal kind of national self and the like and the hugely important role education and educational institutions should play in that grand exercise. Hence, his attention, for a longish period, became steadfastly focussed on his school in Santiniketan. We should say, schools, instead, as Tagore was busy setting up not one but two schools, one in Santiniketan and the other in Sriniketan which is called Siksha-Satra; with two completely separate objectives.

In Visva-Bharati Bulletin No. 6, The Institute of Rural Reconstruction, Sriniketan, Prospectus of apprenticeship and Training Camp, 1925, is written that the general aim of the Training camps organised by the Institute “will be to introduce a boy to a wiser conception of the *Art of Living*. This is taken to include the Art of Livelihood with its Housecraft and Handicraft, the art of thinking and co-ordination of experience, and the art of expression through games, songs, dramas etc., but specially through *the promotion of human welfare in the field of service.*” Tagore himself states, “I myself attach *much more significance* to the educational possibilities of Siksha Satra” as the child here will be “given that *freedom of growth* which the young tree demands for its tender shoot, that field for self-expression in which all young life finds both *training and happiness.*” (Italics mine.)

The manner in which Tagore envisioned that his institutions in the twin-centers, Santiniketan and Sriniketan, would grow would ultimately bridge the ever-widening gap between the country and the city; a gap, originated from the unleashing of forces of 'colonial modernity' by the imperial rulers. Not only that, Tagore came up with a whole lot of projects for rural reconstruction; co-operative movements, agricultural banking, new methods in agriculture, tribal development programmes and the like. He even sent his own son Rathindranath Tagore to America to study the science of agriculture. Like Gandhi, Tagore believed that villages are the real life-line of India, the nation, and Indian civilization and under no circumstances should the villages be allowed to perish. But, unlike Gandhi, Tagore was not averse to the idea of a proper use of 'western science and technology' in the development of the rural population of our country. Tagore diagnosed that the gravest malady facing his country was not political but social. In his famous Bangla essay *Swadeshi Samaj* he discussed in great detail why the 'Indian *samaj*' (not identical with the western notion of 'society') should be made into the primary building-block of India— the nation, and how it should once again be turned into a self-sufficient, self-governed unit. He even sketched somewhat of a constitution for this rejuvenated *swadeshi samaj* as to how this should be governed. He knew that the story of political subjugation for this country will one day end but trouble will not be over for the poor, hapless people of this country until we turn our attention to the problems which neither the British rulers nor the nationalist leaders had so far taken concrete steps to eradicate. In a letter to the *Manchester Guardian* dated 2 October 1936 Tagore writes, “The chronic want of food and water, the lack of sanitation and medical help, the neglect of means of communication, the poverty of educational provision, the all-pervading spirit of depression that I have myself seen prevail in our villages after

over a hundred years of British rule make me despair...” Tagore's experience as a zamindar in Selaidaha and Patisar in present-day Bagladesh gave him enough opportunity to witness these evils from very close quarters.

Professor Das Gupta in her introductory note to the last section of the anthology, 'A Self-respecting Nationalism as Our Salvation', writes, “Tagore's position on nationalism was under attack from the Indian nationalist leadership with the exception of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru who valued and adopted Tagore's world-embracing and inclusive nationalism for India's future as a liberal, secular democracy. Tagore posited the idea that the history of the growth of freedom is the history of the perfection of human relationships.” The idea 'growth of freedom' has as its corollary in the idea, 'individuality of the self'. The discussion of these ideas would take us to issues like the adoption of strategies of non-co-operation or of violence by freedom-fighters who had to blindly follow the path shown by the leaders, even if their individual natures refused to subscribe to the dominant views of freedom movement. Tagore was particularly averse to the use of violence by the extremist groups. The question always plagued him whether violence, as a principle, could be a moral means even to just ends. He writes in his essay *Chhoto o Baro*, “...Since the days of *Swadeshi* excitement I have been writing against the extremist movement. I have kept on saying that the reward that one gets by doing a wrong will never be at an affordable price; only the debt of the wrong will become terribly heavy. . . .” In *Char Adhyay* we see how choosing the path of violence ultimately destroys the moral fibre of selfless revolutionaries like Indranath and turns Atindranath, an individual with fine poetic sensibility, *swadharmabhrasta* and *swabhabchyuta*. *Char Adhyay* is Tagore's most memorable indictment against man resorting to violence against other men and it is extremely befitting that Professor Das Gupta chooses to close the anthology with this novelette. This piece of creative writing, like many other polemical writings of this anthology, makes Tagore our contemporary more than ever, when the most of the world is trying to find answer as to how to put a stop to the endless bloodbath that is raging all across the globe. Tagore's stance against violence links him with Walter Benjamin, his contemporary, (his short yet extremely dense essay, 'Critique of Violence', included in *One-way Street and Other Essays*, is one of the most potent attacks against violence in the twentieth century) and intellectuals of the twenty-first century, like, Amartya Sen (*Identity and Violence*) and Slavoz Zizek (*Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*), among many others. Mario Vargas Llosa, the Nobel Prize winner for literature in 2010, is another prominent creative artist of our time who has been consistently portraying how the unholy alliance between power

and violence is depriving men of their individual rights and freedom; things that Tagore, above everything else, always stood for.

The quality of the photographs included in this volume is not of very high quality. The size of the font used in the book makes it a rather tiring reading and the standard of binding too leaves a lot to be desired for such a high-priced book.

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