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**Rabindranath Tagore and Nationalism:**  
**An Interpretation**

by

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# Rabindranath Tagore and Nationalism: An Interpretation<sup>1</sup>

Michael Collins<sup>2</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

What is needed is eagerness of heart for a fruitful communication between different cultures. Anything that prevents this is barbarism.

Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabli*.<sup>3</sup>

Rabindranath Tagore is often referred to as a ‘nationalist poet’ or a ‘nationalist leader’.<sup>4</sup> This presents problems both historical and historiographical, since by the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally given at the South Asia Institute colloquium, University of Heidelberg, on 6th November 2007. I’m indebted to all the responses and constructive criticisms offered that day, and in particular to Subrata K. Mitra and Barnita Bagchi. I would also like to thank David Washbrook of Trinity College, University of Cambridge, for his critical reading of this paper. Needless to say its remaining deficiencies are my responsibility alone.

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<sup>3</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Rabindra Rachanabli’: Kalyan Sen Gupta, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005). p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> The instances of this are numerous and widespread. In a 1990 essay on W. B. Yeats, Edward Said referred to Tagore as one of the ‘great nationalist artists of decolonisation and revolutionary nationalism’: a passing comment indicative of just how poorly represented Tagore has sometimes been in mainstream postcolonial writing. See Edward Said, ‘Yeats and Decolonisation’, in Frederic Jameson & Edward Said Terry Eagleton (ed.), *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990). p. 73. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said shifted his stance a little and acknowledged that ‘many nationalists are sometimes more coercive or more intellectually self-critical than others’, and argued that his own thesis was ‘that, at its best, nationalist resistance to imperialism was always critical to itself’. Moreover, he wrote, ‘an attentive reading of towering figures within the nationalist ranks – writers like C. L. R. James,

end of the first decade of the twentieth century Tagore had explicitly rejected nationalism. Even his prior ambivalence towards nationalism is disputed by some of those who knew him most intimately. In a letter sent by Prasanta Mahalanobis to Edward J. Thompson in 1921, Mahalanobis claims that Tagore ‘never supported nationalism, not in any form or guise. Even at the height of the *swadeshi* movement he was protesting against some particular aspects’.<sup>5</sup>

The views of some of Tagore’s contemporaries presented a different picture still, but one that lends support to Mahalanobis’ interpretation. Commenting on Tagore’s very public opposition of the philosophy and practice of ‘non-cooperation’, an editorial in the pages of the Calcutta newspaper *Ananda Bazar Patrika* on 19 August 1925 captures some of the flavour of the vehement criticism Tagore was subjected to. ‘The ludicrous opinions of the Poet may appeal to those who live in a dream-world’, the paper wrote, ‘but those who are grounded in the soil of this country and know of the realities ... will no doubt feel that the Poet’s useless labours are sad and pitiful’.<sup>6</sup> An article published in 1928 by a Bengali Gandhian went further still: ‘it will not be unjust to say that he [Tagore] is unfit to be a priest at the sacred sacrificial rites for freedom’.<sup>7</sup> These discomfiting judgements indicate why Tagore the anti-nationalist, anti-non-co-operator and critic of Gandhi is often ignored in favour of the more anodyne image of Tagore as Bengali cultural icon, patriotic author of *Amar Shona Bangla* and a representative of Indian cultural genius; universally recognised via his poetry and his Nobel Prize.

At the same time, Tagore’s legacy is further complicated by certain trends in Indian postcolonial historiography. Work emerging from the Subaltern Studies Collective has often put forward a more complex historical analysis, moving beyond a straightforward dichotomy between nationalism and anti-nationalism. In this version of Tagore’s place in India’s past, he is simultaneously both inside and outside: a Bengali intellectual deeply marked by his ‘cosmopolitanism’, ‘modernism’ and other derivative tropes of western bourgeois intellectual and cultural life. But in this mode of analysis, Tagore too often suffers from simplistic application of various Western classifications, for example as a ‘romantic modernist’.<sup>8</sup>

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Neruda, Tagore ... Fanon, Cabral, and others – discriminates among the various forces vying for ascendancy within the anti-imperialist, nationalist camp’. See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993). p. 264. But even this revised analysis is confusing. In terms of understanding, more is lost than gained by Said lumping these thinkers together in the ‘nationalist ranks’, and I suggest that this is especially so with regard to Tagore. Such approaches – in which the author attempts to argue that Tagore was a subtle nationalist, or a ‘liberal’ nationalists are in some ways more damaging – precisely because they are more insidious – than the more crude assertions. Consider the following quote, which – even when attempting to praise Tagore – misrepresents his position. In an article on Hans Cohn’s liberal nationalism, Ken Wolf claims that ‘Cohn praised Tagore’s nationalism as one “of freedom and not of domination”, built on service to justice and truth’. This displays all the typical characteristics of an inattentive reading of Tagore’s work which must be recognised as either patently incorrect or emptying the term ‘nationalism’ of any of its analytical value. Ken Wolf, ‘Hans Cohn’s Liberal Nationalism: The Historian as Prophet’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 37/4 (1976), p. 662.

<sup>5</sup> Prasanta Mahalanobis to E. J. Thompson, December, 1921: E. P. Thompson, ‘Introduction’: Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (London: Papermac, 1991). p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed.), *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915-1941* (New Delhi: National Book Trust India, 1997). p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p.22.

<sup>8</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (London: Zed Books, 1993). pp. 99-100. Although not part of the Subaltern Studies Collective, Harish Trivedi’s

One of the reasons that commentators on Tagore have felt it necessary to stress Tagore's intellectual debts to the West is the simple fact of his interactions with Western intellectuals. His travels to the West and his numerous high profile Western friends appear to be evidence for some of an indelible mark upon the Tagorean mind. Indeed, one biographer has gone so far as to assert that 'Tagore loved his country and his people, but made no secret of the fact that he admired the British character more than the Indian. This his compatriots never forgave him. For this history will honour him'.<sup>9</sup> Coming from a very different angle, Nirad Chaudhuri has suggested that Tagore sought from the West the kind of recognition he was missing at home.<sup>10</sup> I have argued in some detail elsewhere that such interpretations miss the seriousness of Tagore's intentions. For example, Tagore's voyage to London in 1912 was neither casual nor accidental, nor did it derive from a desire for recognition as such.<sup>11</sup> The search for recognition may have been an incidental consideration in Tagore's mind (which human being is immune from such emotions?), but there is an overwhelming body of evidence found in essays and letters published or sent prior to Tagore's departure that point towards a far grander, more theoretically interesting project of cultural communication that seeks to move beyond an imperial-national dichotomy. Subsequent work published by Tagore in English – mostly published in *The Modern Review* and in book form by Macmillan – further develops a coherent Tagorean position linking Indian history to a critique of the modern ideology of nationalism. This placed Tagore in an ambivalent, controversial position vis-à-vis the British Empire: but one that is more nuanced than his many critics and interpreters have acknowledged. Significantly, and in contradistinction to those who have accentuated a 'derivative' element of Tagore's thinking, Tagore's philosophical critique of nationalism was firmly grounded, above all else, in a critical reading of Indian traditions, particularly in evidence in Tagore's deployment of his *Brahmo* inheritance and the ideas of the *Upanishads*.

What is perhaps most interesting is that, like Hegel, Tagore saw World History as the steady unfolding of an idea. The marked distinction was that, unlike Hegel, he placed India at the centre of that process. In this regard, Tagore developed an alternative conception of modernity which saw the ideas, politics and technology of the West as only one aspect of a developing historical process, rather than its core movement. This not only challenges the spatial dimensions of modernity but also challenges us to think more critically about 'modernities' and the kinds of categories we deploy to make sense of the 'modern' and 'counter-modern'.

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article 'Nationalism, Internationalism and Imperialism: Tagore on England and the West' displays similar tendencies, portraying Tagore (misleadingly) as a 'liberal humanist', and implying throughout forms of intellectual collaboration and derivation from Western influences.

Harish Trivedi, 'Nationalism, Internationalism and Imperialism: Tagore on England and the West', in G. R. Taneja and Vinod Sena (eds.), *Literature East and West: Essays Presented to R. K. Dasgupta* (New Delhi: Allied, 1995), pp. 163-176.

<sup>9</sup> Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (Calcutta: Visva Bharati, 1980). p. 260.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, 'Tagore and the Nobel Prize', *Illustrated Weekly*, 11 March (1973). p. 1029, and Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995). p. 161.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Collins, 'History and the Postcolonial: Rabindranath Tagore's Reception in London, 1912-1913', *The International Journal of the Humanities*, Vol. 4, No. 9 (2007), pp. 71-84.

The Tagore-Gandhi debates become a crucial historical and textual source for an interpretation of Tagore's thinking on nationalism. The debates centred on the freedom struggle and India's stance towards the West; and towards Britain as the colonial power. They point towards a complicated engagement with the West, its position in the world, its relationship to India and the political and intellectual influences that it had in India. These debates took place within a wider setting of Indian arguments about modernity, and in Tagore's case represent the fruition of years of intellectual struggle from Ram Mohun through Debendranath Tagore and Keshub Chandra Sen.<sup>12</sup> But a particular focus on the Tagore-Gandhi debates is one that is not only historically but also historiographically significant.

This is so because there has been a tendency amongst some subalternists and postcolonialists to dismiss Tagore and to place him within categories which are both inappropriate and, ironically, derivative of Western terms of reference. This way of representing Tagore, deploying him as a heuristic device revealing the need to 'provincialise' Western influence, is indicative of a flawed postcolonial methodology that essentialise the West as a 'hyperreal' category. Tagore, in both theory and practice, stands as a counterweight to this trend. In order to recover the complexity of Tagore's thought, and hence move beyond a binary taxonomy of 'nationalist' or 'liberal modernist', we need to return to Tagore's own writings and the intellectual history of his debates with Gandhi. Hence this paper adopts a theoretical framework that allows the agency and intellectual contribution – derived from both textual and biographical sources – of a figure such as Tagore to unsettle some of the overdetermined and unhistorical categories deployed within the field of postcolonial studies.

#### WHAT IS TAGORE'S 'NATION'?

Tagore was, it should never be forgotten, a poet first. Hence he followed the maxim: 'never opt for a straightforward definition when a simile will suffice'. E. P. Thompson noted this tendency in his introduction to the 1991 edition of *Nationalism*, and quoted his father, E. J. Thompson, as having rebuked Tagore over this point ('no man should let himself be at the mercy of his similes').<sup>13</sup> But in fact, on the question of the nation, Tagore gives one of his clearer statements. A nation, he says, is understood 'in the sense of the political and economic union of a people' and is 'that aspect which a whole population assumes when organised for a mechanical purpose'.<sup>14</sup> Immediately we get a sense of Tagore's strategic use of the term. For Tagore, a nation cannot be equated with 'ethnie', nor straightforwardly with a cultural or linguistic group. It may have been born out of – and still comprise – such phenomena, but for Tagore the nation is distinctively modern and exclusively Western. Its 'mechanical purpose' implicates an instrumental rationality in its political organisational form. The nation is a force that is greater than the sum of its parts: it has a purpose, and this purposeful element is reified in the form of the state. Therefore, in Tagore's critique, the nation is always the 'nation-state'.

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<sup>12</sup> My Oxford D.Phil. thesis – entitled 'Rabindranath Tagore and the West, 1912-1941' – has a substantial chapter situating Tagore within Brahmoism. Indeed the 'embeddedness' of Tagore – as opposed to a free floating cosmopolitanism, which he rejected – is crucial to my overall position.

<sup>13</sup> E. P. Thompson, 'Introduction': Tagore, *Nationalism*. p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 51.

This approach to the idea of the nation cuts across late twentieth century debates about the nature of nations and nationalism. If we think about the exchanges between two of the most significant scholars of nations and nationalism, Ernest Gellner and Anthony D. Smith, and ‘feed in’ a Tagorean perspective, we would find Tagore (perhaps unexpectedly) agreeing, in some senses, with Gellner’s modernist understanding of the nation. Smith’s emphasis on the importance of ‘history, myths and memories’<sup>15</sup> for nations, thereby stressing their pre-modernity, would concur with what Tagore calls ‘a people’ or ‘peoples’. Gellner’s emphasis is on high politics and the ideology of nationalism which ‘creates nations’, rather than pre-existing nations giving rise to nationalism.<sup>16</sup> This is precisely what Tagore sees as essential to nations, which are historically possible only within the context of specific aspects of Western modernity. The characteristics of that particular modernity which gives rise to nations are the regulatory power of the state, combined with science, set within a wider framework of commercial and military competition between individual national units.<sup>17</sup> The value of the comparison with contemporary political theories of nations and nationalism is more than just incidental. It reminds us that Tagore’s perspective on the Western nation was that it belonged to a particular period in the West’s history, but it constituted neither a universal model nor a necessary path of convergence.

### State and society

Tagore’s ‘contrast concept’, which helps us place his definition within the parameters of contemporary debates on nations and nationalism – as well as distinguish a distinctively Tagorean position – is ‘society’. The nation is equated with the state as ‘the organised self-interest of a whole people, where it is least human and least spiritual’.<sup>18</sup> The nation-state is a ‘machinery of commerce and politics turn[ing] out neatly compressed bales of humanity which have their use and high market value’.<sup>19</sup> Society, by contrast, has ‘no ulterior purpose’, but is rather ‘an end in itself’. In short, ‘it is a spontaneous self expression of man as a social being. It is a natural regulation of human relationships, so that men can develop ideals of life in cooperation with one another’.<sup>20</sup> Tagore replaces the ideology of nation with the idea of *swadeshi samaj*, of ‘social relations that are not mechanical and impersonal but based on love and cooperation’.<sup>21</sup> The key characteristic of the modern Western nation is that it seeks to exercise power by regulating its populace (what Tagore would simply call ‘the people’) and directing their collective energies towards externally oriented goals. The nation-state, for Tagore, is an organising system and a structure of power. This ‘hardening method of national efficiency gains in strength, and at least for some limited period of time it proudly proves itself to be the fittest to survive ... but it is the survival of that part of man which is the least living’.<sup>22</sup> It produces efficiency but also monotony and sameness, such that Western modernity – for example as manifested in modern towns, which presents to us ‘the physiognomy of this dominance of the nation’ –

<sup>15</sup> Anthony D. Smith, 'Nations and Their Pasts', *Nations and Nationalism*, 2/3 (1996), p. 359.

<sup>16</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964). p. 174.

<sup>17</sup> Tagore, *Nationalism*. p. 51.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. 49.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 51.

<sup>21</sup> Sen Gupta, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*. p. 50.

<sup>22</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Nation', *The Modern Review*, 22/1 (1917), p. 1. Cf. Rabindranath Tagore, 'Creative Unity', in Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Volume Two* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1922), p. 548.

are 'everywhere the same from San Francisco to London, [and now] from London to Tokyo'.<sup>23</sup>

The nation is thus characterised as externally aggressive and competitive, but is also equated with internal disciplinary and regulatory power and the erosion of difference. Hence, in both its internal and external orientations, it is the negation of that freedom which is to be found in the life-world of 'peoples': 'living personalities' that find their self expression in 'literature, art, social symbolism' and ceremony.<sup>24</sup> Again, the similarity between Tagore's 'people' and Smith's 'nation' – grounded in what Smith terms 'ethno-symbolism' – is striking.<sup>25</sup> A second contrast concept utilised by Tagore to draw his distinctions between the activities of the nation-state and the life-world of society is 'politics'. As E. P. Thompson rightly points out, Tagore was the founder of an 'anti-politics' who 'more than any other thinker of this time, had a clear conception of civil society, as something distinct from and of stronger and more personal texture than political or economic structures'.<sup>26</sup> When political civilisation prevails, Tagore wrote:

nations live in an atmosphere of fear, greed, and panic, due to the preying of one nation upon other [sic] for material wealth. Its civilisation is carnivorous and cannibalistic, feeding upon the blood of weaker nations. Its one idea is to thwart all greatness outside its own boundaries. Never before were there such terrible jealousies, such betrayals of trust; all this is called patriotism, whose creed is politics.<sup>27</sup>

There is confusion afoot, Tagore says, when equating the idea of 'nation' with 'people'.<sup>28</sup> It leads to 'a hopeless moral blindness'. The 'ideal of the social man is unselfishness' whereas that of the nation is selfishness.<sup>29</sup> Hence, extolling the virtues of the nation means that 'the moral foundation of man's civilisation is unconsciously undergoing change', such that 'we find men feeling convinced of the superior claims of Christianity, because Christian nations are in possession of the greater part of the world. It is like supporting a robber's religion by quoting the amount of the stolen property'.<sup>30</sup> It is the cult of the nationalism, Tagore believes, that allows us to celebrate the nation even though 'what we see in practice is that every nation who has prospered [materially] has done so through its career of aggressive selfishness either in commercial adventures or in foreign possessions or in both'.<sup>31</sup> Tagore's point is not that the body he calls 'the people' is entirely innocent; 'we must admit that evils there are in human nature and they come out in spite of our faith in moral laws', he says. But the advent of the nation as

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<sup>23</sup> Tagore, 'The Nation'. p. 1. Cf. Tagore, 'Creative Unity'. p. 548.

<sup>24</sup> Tagore, 'The Nation'. p. 1. Cf. Tagore, 'Creative Unity'. p. 548.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of ethno-symbolic approaches to the nation see Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1998). pp. 170-198.

<sup>26</sup> E. P. Thompson, 'Introduction': Tagore, *Nationalism*. p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Nationalism', in Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Volume Two* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1917), p. 1-2. Cf. Tagore, 'Creative Unity'. p. 550.

<sup>28</sup> To reiterate, the relevance of Tagore's formulation to the debate between Gellner and Smith is pertinent. Gellner accepted that the modern nation had its roots in pre-modern ethnies, but tried to stress the qualitatively different nature of the modern nation which distinguished it from its antecedents. Tagore – for very different purposes – is making exactly the same point in his distinction between 'nation' and 'people'.

<sup>29</sup> Tagore, 'The Nation'. p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2-3.



understood in the modern West provides both vehicle and ideology for the accentuation and acceleration of the more negative, selfish, competitive spirit of man. '[W]hen this idea of the Nation, which has met with universal acceptance in the present day, tries to pass off the cult of selfishness as a moral duty ... it not only commits depredations but attacks the very vitals of humanity'.<sup>32</sup>

Tagore implicitly points to the power of the national ideal to generate action and self-sacrifice when he claims that the problem with nationalism is that it teaches that 'the nation is greater than the people'.<sup>33</sup> This is interesting because Tagore claims it is precisely the 'power of self-sacrifice' and the 'moral faculty of sympathy and co-operation' that constitutes 'the guiding spirit of social vitality'.<sup>34</sup> Some nationalists – and indeed some analysts of nationalism – have argued the opposite position: that it is the ideal of nationhood that can inspire the individual to greater ends than he or she alone could achieve. In Benedict Anderson's famous example, it is the seductive emotional power of the 'tomb of the unknown soldier', in which the principle of sacrifice – in anonymity, and on behalf of all 'the people' – becomes a core ideal of the modern imagined national community.<sup>35</sup> Others have pointed out the way in which the national community has been integral to the moral bonds and shared risks underpinning modern welfarism.<sup>36</sup> But for Tagore, by contrast, the fetishisation of national form is ultimately opposed to the spirit of self-sacrifice. This is so because nationalism leads the people 'to ignore the moral law *which is universal* and uses it only within the bounds of its narrow sphere'.<sup>37</sup> This, in an important sense, is the crux of Tagore's critique of the modern nation. He is an insistent universalist in his belief that moral truth is one, indivisible and omnipresent: hence, any 'external' organisational form which seeks to contradict that truth is a moral offence. It is the nation-state, for Tagore – in dividing humankind – which most aggressively presages this sin. This kind of formulation was never likely to satisfy anyone interested in a systematic theory of nations and nationalism. It didn't then, and it does not now. But Tagore's objective, of course, was not to provide such a theory. Rather, it was to make an intervention in India's evolving, proto-national public sphere: to offer an assessment of the global historical context in which he found himself, based on a moral and spiritual vision and providing a 'message', both to India and to the West.

### **The philosophical grounding of anti-nationalism**

In the development of Tagore's argument, we see a distinction between the internal and the external. Where humanity is living, it is guided by 'inner ideals'.<sup>38</sup> Tagore then uses an interesting analogy, suggesting that 'the idea of the nation is the professionalism of the people'. Professionalism is 'the region where men specialise their knowledge and organise their power, where they mercilessly elbow each other in their struggle'. Such professionalism must not be allowed 'to assume complete mastery over the personal man, making him narrow and hard, exclusively intent on the pursuit of success at the cost of his faith in ideals'.<sup>39</sup> It is precisely this kind of

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 3. Cf. Tagore, 'Creative Unity'. pp. 550-551.

<sup>33</sup> Tagore, 'The Nation'. p. 3. Cf. Tagore, 'Creative Unity'. p. 551.

<sup>34</sup> Tagore, 'The Nation'. p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2nd edn.; London: Verso, 1991). p. 10.

<sup>36</sup> David Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

<sup>37</sup> Tagore, 'The Nation'. p. 3, my emphasis. Cf. Tagore, 'Creative Unity'. p. 548.

<sup>38</sup> Tagore, 'The Nation'. p. 1. Cf. Tagore, 'Creative Unity'. pp. 548-549.

<sup>39</sup> Tagore, 'The Nation'. p. 1, my emphasis. Cf. Tagore, 'Creative Unity'. p. 548.

competitiveness that Tagore sees as being inherent in the modern idea of the nation. The organisational and disciplinary capacity of the modern nation is intimately bound up with the state, and Tagore's position was one in which the entire world of politics and bureaucracy is rejected in favour of a 'spontaneous' life-world based on the 'social regulation of differences on the one hand, and the spiritual recognition of unity on the other'.<sup>40</sup> But where does this Tagorean position come from?

As Kalyan Sen Gupta notes in his *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, 'while he [Tagore] was ... receptive to ideas associated with the Bauls and Sufis of Bengal, as well as to Hindu Vaishnavism and to Buddhism, it was always to the *Upanishadic* endeavour to relate everything to a single ultimate reality that he remained most faithful'.<sup>41</sup> The *Upanishads* are concerned, amongst other things, with the nature of the 'ultimate reality' that stands behind the world of everyday experience. Ultimate reality consists of a supreme power which is both immanent in the universe and also responsible for sustaining and regulating it. Given the name *Brahman*, it represents a universal 'world soul', which Tagore himself referred to as the Infinite Personality. From this springs an obvious moral imperative: 'if each of us belongs to the universal soul, if the same infinite is equally present in all of us, then we ourselves are at bottom identical or one with each other ... [and] recognition of this paves the way to openness to others, and generates in us love and concern for our fellow beings'.<sup>42</sup> This means that, for Tagore, 'our basic commitment to the good of others is grounded in an intellectual, philosophical understanding of the nature of reality'.<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps the key distinction to be drawn between Tagore's position and the classical position developed in the *Upanishads* is one between epistemology and phenomenology. For the *Upanishadic* thinkers, the ultimate monistic reality that gave rise to a conception of human 'oneness' was a matter of metaphysical inference. Whilst one can certainly establish a reading of Tagore's position which is similar to this *Upanishadic* perspective, what is more significant is that, for Tagore, such 'oneness' that represents an 'Infinite Self' or 'Infinite Personality' is to be *experienced*, not merely deduced. It is not a matter of rational argument. Instead, 'reality in all its manifestations reveals itself in the emotional and imaginative background of our mind. We know it not because we can think of it, but because we directly feel it'.<sup>44</sup>

This 'emotional background' is part of an alternative theory of human nature that is central to Tagore's philosophy and, logically, his anti-nationalism. It is based on the (ultimately speculative) insight that the ontology of love is more central and insistent to the human condition than that of antagonism. This insistent aspect of our being is what Tagore called the 'personal man', man in an unalienated condition. 'It is the personal man', Tagore claimed, 'who is conscious of truth, beauty and goodness', and 'it is almost a truism to say that the fundamental light of this world of personality is Love'.<sup>45</sup> But Tagore should not be judged as a thinker whose conception of love was merely aesthetic or abstract. In

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<sup>40</sup> Tagore, *Nationalism*. p. 48.

<sup>41</sup> Sen Gupta, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*. p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p. 10.

<sup>44</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Religion of Man', in Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Volume Three* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1931), p. 128.

<sup>45</sup> C. F. Andrews, 'Thoughts from Rabindranath Tagore': *Ibid.*(1929), p. 76.

an important and extended letter to C. F. Andrews, written in 1918, shortly after he returned to Shantiniketan from his tour of the United States, Tagore explained his ideal of love as realised in the social world:

We must keep in mind that love of persons and love of ideas can be terribly egoistic and that love can therefore lead to bondage instead of setting us free. It is constant sacrifice and service, which alone can loosen the shackles. We must not merely enjoy our love (whether personal or ideal) by contemplating its beauty and truth, but giving expression to it in our life's work.<sup>46</sup>

The idea that life, the Real, exists in obstinate antagonism to the Ideal suggests the importance of *maya* – the world of illusions – for Tagore's philosophy, and gives us a sense of why he has been referred to as *maya yogi*.<sup>47</sup> The path towards truth is not a straightforward one. Man as man is far from perfect, and life itself presents myriad obstacles, but the ultimate truth of love and the compulsion towards unity is, for Tagore, a primary force. As he expressed it in poetic form:

Let the veil of 'I' fall apart  
And the pure light of consciousness  
Break through the mists  
Revealing the everlasting face of truth.<sup>48</sup>

The sense of oneness – in marked contradistinction, we might say, to the modernist idea of *alienation* – is in fact a pressing aspect of our everyday being. One important source of inspiration for this Tagorean position was the supposedly *unalienated* existence of the Shantal tribespeople who lived close to Tagore's ashram in Shantiniketan. In a letter to Andrews, Tagore wrote: 'look at the aboriginal *Shantal* women around our *ashram*. In them, the ideal of physical life finds its perfect development, only because they are ever active in giving it expression in work'.<sup>49</sup> Tagore sees the individual life as an always incomplete endeavour: a human being 'is aware that he is not imperfect but incomplete. He knows that in himself some meaning has yet to be realised'.<sup>50</sup> As Sen Gupta puts it, '[i]t is in the conviction, founded in direct experience, that a person is not a discrete, isolated being and may only realise his or her true nature through identification with the whole universe, that the essence of Tagore's spirituality resides'.<sup>51</sup> The realisation of this unity becomes part of the work of human existence, indeed, for Tagore it becomes its overriding purpose, and constitutes a kind of 'frontierism of the self', ever pushing the boundary of the individual outwards.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 10 March 1918: C. F. Andrews, 'Letters to a Friend', in Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Volume Three* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1928), p. 254, my emphasis.

<sup>47</sup> Mair Pitt, *The Maya-Yogi and the Mask: A Study of Rabindranath Tagore and W. B. Yeats* (Salzburg University of Salzburg, 1997). Cf. R. D. Bhattacharya, 'Personal Man and Personal God: The Tagorean Conception Revisited', *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 15/4 (1975), pp. 425-38.

<sup>48</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Arogyo', Rabindra Rachanabli, Vol. 3: Sen Gupta, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*. p. 11.

<sup>49</sup> Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 10 March 1918: Andrews, 'Letters to a Friend'. p. 254.

<sup>50</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Religion of Man', p. 57.

<sup>51</sup> Sen Gupta, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*. p. 11.

<sup>52</sup> I owe this phrase to Sibaji Bandyopadhyaya, which he used during a conversation at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC), February, 2006. It seemed to encapsulate much of what Tagore's theory of man is seeking to convey. Any misapplication of this idea is, needless to say, my responsibility alone.

This leads to what Sen Gupta calls the '*leitmotif*' of the location of a person ... [being] outside the narrow confines of a self or ego'.<sup>53</sup> For Tagore, this movement beyond the self has both an aesthetic and a soteriological aspect. It is by stepping outside of ourselves that we can be 'saved' from ourselves. 'I strive', Tagore once explained to one of his most famous students, 'for a rare salvation', which is 'the salvation of oneself from one's own self'.<sup>54</sup> It is also in doing so that we realise the aesthetic, harmonious nature of the whole. Tagore put it thus:

[i]n the night, we stumble over things and become acutely conscious of their individual separateness, but the day reveals the greater unity which embraces them. And the man whose inner vision is bathed in an illumination of his consciousness ... no longer awkwardly stumbles over individual facts of separateness in the human world, accepting them as final; he realises that peace is in the inner harmony which dwells in truth, and not in any outer adjustments.<sup>55</sup>

This movement beyond the self is also, for Tagore, the essence of man. This essence lies in the so-called 'surplus' that man experiences in his creative, spiritual self, which takes him beyond the individualistic and pragmatic concerns of biological necessity, and can be experienced and manifested 'in many spheres of human life – in our fellowship with other persons, in artistic endeavour, in religion, and in our harmony with the natural world'.<sup>56</sup> Tagore's theory of human nature is grounded in man as a creative being, in which 'our imagination makes us intensely conscious of a life we must live which transcends the individual life and contradicts the biological meaning of the instinct of self-preservation'.<sup>57</sup> This creativity is not something which can be isolated, but must be shared to be realised. This has significant implications for his approach to the idea of freedom. Freedom is not a negative quality, not concerned with independence, but rather inter-dependence:

One may imagine that an individual who succeeds in disassociating himself from his fellows attains real freedom, inasmuch as all ties of relationship implied obligation to others. But we know that ... it is true that in the human world only a perfect arrangement of interdependence gives rise to freedom. The most individualistic of human beings who own no responsibility are the savages who failed to attain their fullness of manifestation ... only those maintain freedom ... you have the power to cultivate mutual understanding and cooperation. The history of the growth of freedom is the history of the perfection of human relationship.<sup>58</sup>

What the above discussion suggests is that Tagore's discussion of 'nation' draws a clear distinction between the nation as a nation-state on the one hand – with its fetishisation of territory and boundaries, its machine-like bureaucracy and its politics, which narrow the sphere of human life and encourage inter-national competitiveness and intra-national homogenisation – and society on the other.

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<sup>53</sup> Sen Gupta, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*. p. 11.

<sup>54</sup> Rabindranath Tagore in conversation with his student, Maitreyi Devi: *Ibid.* p. 12.

<sup>55</sup> C. F. Andrews, 'Thoughts from Rabindranath Tagore', in Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Volume Three* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1929), p. 76.

<sup>56</sup> Sen Gupta, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*. pp. 13-14.

<sup>57</sup> Tagore, 'The Religion of Man'. p. 53.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p. 164.

Moreover, this insistence that the nation-state is hostile to the true 'social man' is a position that can be derived from Tagore's readings of the *Upanishads* and his own phenomenology of the every day. Whether one agrees with Tagore's critique of the nation, it is, I suggest, systematically linked to central elements of Tagore's philosophy that owe nothing of any substance to external or derivative intellectual or philosophical trends. Tagore's ideas of the alienation engendered by the politics of the state versus the unalienated life-world; his juxtaposition of state and politics with society and religion; his critique of the utilitarian basis of modern nationalism; and his insistence that love forms the basis of human nature could all be shown to have affinities with, variously: Marxism, anarchism, Romanticism and Christian theology. But the important fact is that for Tagore, none of his ideas were in fact derived from these sources. If affinities could be established, all the better, Tagore might say, for it merely confirmed his belief in 'universal truth'. But Tagorean anti-nationalism was almost exclusively borne out of Indian philosophical and theological traditions, and out of autochthonous historical experience.

### ARGUING WITH GANDHI

Gandhi and Tagore met for the first time in Shantiniketan in February 1915, but Tagore's awareness of Gandhi and his activities in South Africa had developed from about 1913. The Anglican missionary C. F. Andrews had been resident at Tagore's *ashram* in Shantiniketan since late 1912. In late 1913, Andrews set sail from Calcutta to Durban where he hoped to learn more about Mr Gandhi – not yet *mahatma*, for the appellation would be given by Tagore – and make a contribution to his struggle for the rights of Indians in South Africa. It was via the pen of Andrews that Tagore's interest in Gandhi developed, and in 1915 Andrews facilitated a visit to Tagore's *ashram* by boys from Gandhi's Phoenix School. But it was not until 1919 that their correspondence would take the vital and critical form that makes their exchange so valuable as a historical source.

By this time, those hoping for a genuine post-war reform programme had been disappointed by the limited imaginings of the Montagu-Chelmsford proposals, and then humiliated by the draconian Rowlatt Act passed in March 1919, which undermined basic civil liberties in the mistaken – though all too widely held – belief that popular movements could be controlled by state repression. It was at this juncture that Gandhi rose dramatically to national prominence and hence came to Tagore's attention. Gandhi's *satyagraha* in March and April 1919 – directed against the Rowlatt legislation – had prompted unprecedented levels of popular involvement in political struggles, far removed from the elite musings of the Indian National Congress. It had also led to various outbreaks of violence, and for Tagore – as for Gandhi – this was a cause of grave concern.

Gandhi had asked Tagore, in a letter written on 5 April, for a public declaration of support for the *satyagraha*. In response, Tagore wrote to Gandhi on 12 April with a prophetic warning: 'our authorities have shown us their claws', he said, '[and the] power of good must prove its truth and strength by its fearlessness, by its refusal to accept any imposition which depends for its success upon its power to produce frightfulness and is not ashamed to use its machines of destruction to terrorise a population completely disarmed'.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, 'power in all its forms', he wrote, 'is irrational – it is like the horse that drags the carriage

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<sup>59</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to M. K. Gandhi, 12 April, 1919: Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson (eds.), *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 216.

blindfolded. The moral element in it is only represented in the man who drives the horse. Passive resistance is a force which is not necessarily moral in itself; it can be used against truth as well as for it'.<sup>60</sup> Tagore refused to see the idea of non-cooperation in a positive light *simply* because it was non-violent. He instead placed his emphasis on the subjective orientation of those carrying out the act. This position was entirely consistent with Tagore's idealism. *Satyagraha* was not an end in itself: its moral value depended on the ends to which it was directed and, crucially, the motivations for its invocation. Likewise, Gandhi's sense of *ahimsa* as 'active love' also placed an emphasis on the intention of the agent. For both Tagore and Gandhi, the ideal of love – equated with and intimately linked to notions of God and Truth – was central to their ideas of social agency. Tagore's parting words in this letter of April 1919 were therefore not an endorsement of Gandhi's non-cooperation movement, but rather a message in poetic form; Tagore's contribution to what he called Gandhi's 'noble work'. The final stanza of the poem contains much of the philosophical essence that would guide Tagore's response to Gandhi's enactment of non-cooperation as a means of resistance to colonial rule, and it closes thus:

Give me the supreme courage of love, this is my prayer – the courage to speak, to do, to suffer at thy will, to leave all things or be left alone.  
Give me the supreme faith of love, this is my prayer – the faith of the life in death, of the victory in defeat, of power hidden in the frailness of beauty, of the dignity of pain that accepts hurt but disdains to return it.<sup>61</sup>

April 1919 had seen Gandhi-inspired *satyagraha* across the Punjab, and it had also seen widespread violence in which a number of Europeans had been killed. On 13 April, Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer gave his response. In command of some 90 troops, he ordered his men to expend all the ammunition they had into a large crowd gathered at the Jallianwala Bagh, a walled garden in the north of the city. The firing was reported to have lasted for 10 minutes. The result was the death of 379 unarmed civilians, with a further 1,137 injured.<sup>62</sup> During the course of the Hunter Commission – set up to investigate what we now know as the Amritsar Massacre – Dyer stated that had he been able to make use of the two mounted machine guns at his disposal, he would have. In the event, the narrow walled lanes that provided the limited entry and exit points from the garden prevented him from doing so. But his intention was clear. 'If more troops had been at hand', he told the Hunter Committee, 'the casualties would have been greater in proportion'. Indeed, '[i]t was no longer a question of merely dispersing the crowd'. His desire was to produce 'a sufficient moral effect, from a military point of view, not only on those who were present but more specially throughout the Punjab. There could be no question of undue severity'.<sup>63</sup>

For Gandhi, the lesson was all too clear. In March, he had publicly declared that 'whether you are a *satyagrahi* or not, so long as you disapprove of the Rowlatt

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<sup>60</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to M. K. Gandhi, 12 April, 1919: Ibid. p. 216.

<sup>61</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to M. K. Gandhi, 12 April, 1919: Ibid. p. 218.

<sup>62</sup> These are the official statistics. Unofficial estimates range considerably higher.

<sup>63</sup> 'Report of the Committee [Hunter Committee] Appointed by the Government of India to Investigate the Disturbances in the Punjab, etc.', Parliamentary Papers, Cmd. 681, London, HMSO, 1920; Purnima Bose and Laura Lyons, 'Dyer Consequences: The Trope of Amritsar, Ireland, and the Lessons of The "Minimum" Force Debate', *boundary 2*, 26/2 (1999), p. 203.

legislation you can join [us]'.<sup>64</sup> Numbers and impact were what Gandhi was seeking. But as the course of the *satyagraha* unfolded Gandhi quickly realised that the use of mass public protest and non-violent methods were potentially subject to aberrations on the one side, which in turn had the potential to, as Tagore put it, 'beget evil on the other'.<sup>65</sup> Gandhi gave his public admission of guilt in Ahmedabad on the 14 April, where he said, in light of the recent turn of events, 'a rapier run through my body could hardly have pained me more'.<sup>66</sup> In a letter written on 19 April, he may well have been referring directly to Tagore's warnings about the irrationality of power when he said that 'I at least should have foreseen some of the consequences, specially in view of the gravest warnings that were given to me by friends whose advice I have always sought and valued'.<sup>67</sup>

Although Gandhi was chastened by the consequences of his *satyagraha*, it only furthered his resolve that future non-cooperation would require better leadership, which would in turn require the strengthening of a network of properly inducted *satyagrahis*. The non-cooperation movement of 1919-1922 was thus more organised and strategic. It sought to utilise *swadeshi* as an expression of non-cooperation, an approach which involved the boycotting of foreign produced goods, particularly textiles. It involved not only the boycotting of such goods but also their public, symbolic destruction through burning. In addition, Gandhi called upon India's youth to boycott government schools and so resist what he saw as its programme of indoctrination. These actions – with Gandhi as the ideological and spiritual inspiration – provoked a series of fascinating exchanges between Tagore and Gandhi, played out on the pages of *The Modern Review*, and Gandhi's own journal, *Young India*.

The opening gambit appeared as a set of three letters from Tagore to C. F. Andrews published in *The Modern Review* in May 1921. In them, Tagore expounded at great length on what he saw as the central problematic of Gandhi's movement: the instrumentalisation – and hence corruption – of the ideas of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* via the boycott of education and the burning of cloth. Tagore was also deeply concerned by the implications of this approach for India's stance in regard to the 'outside world'. Continuing his trend of endorsing the moral stature of Gandhi himself, he wrote that 'it is in the fitness of things, that Mahatma Gandhi, frail in body and devoid of all material resources, should call up the immense power of the meek'.<sup>68</sup> But he then goes on to question the very meaning of *swaraj* in what he deems to be its Gandhian sense: his answer is that Gandhi's idea of *swaraj* is only *maya*: 'it is like a mist, that will vanish leaving no stain on the radiance of the Eternal ... we may delude ourselves with ... phrases learnt from the West, [but] *swaraj* is not our objective'.<sup>69</sup> Tagore may have been a *maya yogi*, struggling towards truth through the medium of *maya*, but *maya* itself could not be the aim or the objective.

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<sup>64</sup> M. K. Gandhi, speech at Trichinopoly, 25 March, 1919: Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. p. 104.

<sup>65</sup> Tagore to M. K. Gandhi, 12 April, 1919: Dutta and Robinson (eds.), *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*. p. 216.

<sup>66</sup> M. K. Gandhi, speech at Ahmedabad, 14 April 1919: Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. p. 105.

<sup>67</sup> M. K. Gandhi to Swami Shraddhanand, 17 April, 1919: Ibid. p. 105.

<sup>68</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 2 March, 1921: Bhattacharya (ed.), *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915-1941*. p. 55.

<sup>69</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 2 March, 1921: Ibid. p. 55.

Tagore then turns to his specific objections regarding non-cooperation, claiming that '[t]he idea of non-cooperation is political asceticism'. 'Our students', he said, 'are bringing their offerings of sacrifice to what? Not to a fuller education but to non-education'.<sup>70</sup> For Tagore, withdrawing students from the educational structures that existed and offering them no education at all represented 'the anarchy of a mere emptiness', by which he said he was not tempted.<sup>71</sup> Gandhi's response, entitled 'The Poet's Anxiety', praised Tagore for his 'exquisite jealousy of India's honour'. Gandhi shared with Tagore the belief that freedom, *swaraj*, was not to be gained at any price nor by any means; freedom gained by the wrong means was not freedom at all. *Swaraj* was about process – the journey or the 'experiment', as Gandhi would commonly refer to it – not simply destination. But unlike Tagore, Gandhi stressed the *dharmic* side of non-cooperation. For Gandhi there existed a duty to actively resist evil, not only a duty to do good: '[n]on-cooperation is a protest against an unwitting and unwilling participation in evil ... Government schools have unmanned us ... they have made us what we were intended to become – clerks and interpreters'.<sup>72</sup>

In another *Modern Review* essay entitled 'The Call of Truth', published in August 1921, Tagore picks up on the theme of the *charka*, the spinning wheel that now sits proudly at the heart of the Indian Republic's flag as an enduring emblem of independence.<sup>73</sup> For Gandhi the *charka* was both a symbol of, and means to, freedom. His call to all Indians – including the poet – to take up spinning for 30 minutes a day symbolised solidarity with the poor and the downtrodden. 'When all about me are dying for want of food' he wrote, 'the only occupation permissible for me is to feed the hungry ... Hunger is the argument that is driving India to the spinning wheel. The call of the spinning wheel is the noblest of all. Because it is the call of love. And love is *swaraj*'.<sup>74</sup> Gandhi's belief in the *charka* was both moral and materialist. In a concluding attack on Tagore – ever susceptible to charges of otherworldliness and poetic sensibility – Gandhi suggested that he had 'found it impossible to soothe suffering patients with a song from Kabir', a reference to the fifteenth century Indian poet whose work Tagore had recently translated and published in London. 'The hungry millions ask for one poem', Gandhi continued, 'invigorating food. They cannot be given it. They must earn it. And they can earn only by the sweat of their brow'.<sup>75</sup>

Tagore's objections to what he later called Gandhi's 'cult of the *charka*' were easily misrepresented as being explicable in terms of a lack of interest in the plight of the masses. It is worth remembering at this point that, in addition to founding a school and an international university in Shantiniketan, Tagore also founded a centre for rural reconstruction in West Bengal and as a *zamindar* he encountered rural poverty and was concerned with its amelioration. Such concern may well

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<sup>70</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 5 March, 1921: Dutta and Robinson (eds.), *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*. p. 260.

<sup>71</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 5 March, 1921: Ibid. p. 260.

<sup>72</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, 'The Poet's Anxiety', in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed.), *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915-1941* (New Delhi: National Book Trust of India, 1921), 65-68. p. 66.

<sup>73</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Call of Truth', in Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume Three: A Miscellany* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1921), pp. 412-25.

<sup>74</sup> M. K. Gandhi, 'The Great Sentinel', *Young India*, October 1921: Bhattacharya (ed.), *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915-1941*. pp. 88-89.

<sup>75</sup> M. K. Gandhi, 'The Great Sentinel', *Young India*, October 1921: Ibid. p. 91.



have been grounded in a patrician's sense of *noblesse oblige*, but this should not blind the observer to the role played by Tagore's religious and social perspective. As we have seen, Tagore repeatedly expressed his belief that love must be active love, expressed within a social context. Tagore was equally convinced, like Gandhi – and contrary to what Bhikhu Parekh calls 'the largely negative meaning given to *ahimsa* in Indian traditions' – that *ahimsa* should be expressed in an active, compassionate form.<sup>76</sup>

Tagore's concerns in fact ran deeper, and related to the many problems he felt were inherent in the *charka* movement: homogeneity, regimentation, loss of diversity and the loss of creative thought. The real problem with the *charka* is in essence the same as the problem with the state, bureaucracy, the military, commercial organisations and educational establishments: they seek to regulate and they stunt the 'truth' of man which lies in his creative aspect:

It is admitted that European military camps and factories are stinting man, that their greed is cutting man down to the measure of their own narrow purpose, that for these reasons joylessness darkly lowers over the West. But if man be stunted by big machines, the danger of his being stunted by small machines must not be lost sight of.<sup>77</sup>

As so often, Tagore uses a metaphor to make his point, in this case the idea of a beehive: '[f]rom our master, the Mahatma', Tagore says, 'we must learn the truth of love in all its purity'. But, 'the science and art of building up *swaraj* is a vast subject':

Its pathways are difficult to traverse and take time. For this task, aspiration and emotion must be there, but no less must study and thought be likewise. ... Why should he [that is, Gandhi] not say: Come ye from all sides and be welcome. Let all the forces of the land be brought into action, for then alone shall the country awake. Freedom is in complete awakening, in full self-expression ... but his call came to one narrow field alone. To one and all he simply says: "spin and weave" ... when nature called to the bee to take refuge in the narrow life of the hive, millions of bees responded to it for the sake of efficiency ... the call to the case of efficiency is well enough for the bee. The wealth of power, that is Man's, can only become manifest when his utmost is claimed'.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> See Bhikhu Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse* (rev. edn.; New Delhi: Sage, 1999). pp. 120-154.

<sup>77</sup> Tagore, 'The Call of Truth'. p. 422.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p. 421. A conversation between the two men on the same subject, which took place in Shantiniketan in September 1921, is reported to have ended in the following light-hearted fashion: "Well", said Gandhi, "I can see my request for your help is almost hopeless. If you can do nothing else for me, at least you can put these Bengali *bhadralok* to shame by getting them to do something practical. Gurudev, you can spin. Why not get all your students to sit down around you and spin?". They laugh, as Tagore replies: "Poems I can spin, Gandhiji, songs and plays I can spin, but of your precious cotton what a mess I would make!" The conversation is reported to have taken place between Tagore and Gandhi, with only C. F. Andrews present, in Shantiniketan, early September 1921. An account of the conversation was given by Tagore to Leonard Elmhirst, the agricultural reformer and friend of Tagore, and published in Dutta and Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*. pp. 239-240.

Tagore's point is that such regimentation may have befitted the bee for the sole purpose of producing honey, but in exchange for such efficiency and direction of purpose the bee 'accepted the loss of sex'.<sup>79</sup> Tagore thought that 'any country, the people of which can agree to become neuters for the sake of some temptation, or command, carries within itself its own prison-house'.<sup>80</sup> Tagore saw no reason why all Indians should be engaged in the same activity, and indeed felt this was a denial of the manifest diversity of human talent, thereby inhibiting the full expression of the human capacity for freedom.

### Means and ends

At this point, what can we say about the differences between Tagore and Gandhi? The stereotypical explanation of their relationship is one that has, in all its dimensions, thrived on binaries: the handsome poet and the bespectacled, *khadi* clad Mahatma; the aristocrat and the (self-styled) subaltern; pro-West, anti-West; apolitical, political; modern, non-modern and so on. In fact, they agreed on many issues at a foundational level. But where Gandhi favoured direct action through non-violent means to force an end to British rule and to free Indians from their tutelage in both body and mind, Tagore opposed almost every single one of Gandhi's practical applications of the principles of *satyagraha*. There was a disagreement about means and ends.

In a 1921 letter to C. F. Andrews in which Tagore sets down some of his initial reflections on non-cooperation, Tagore referred to his son Rathindranath, a student of philosophy and an ever-present confidant. He mentions that 'R [meaning Rathindranath], in support of the present movement, has often said to me that passion for rejection is a stronger power in the beginning than the acceptance of an ideal'. 'Though I know it to be a fact', Tagore continues, 'I cannot take it as a truth'.<sup>81</sup> He goes on to explicate this point via an interpretation of the history of India's spiritual development:

Buddha kept silent all through his teachings about the truth of *Om*, the everlasting yes, his implication being that by the negative path of destroying the self we naturally reach that truth. Therefore he emphasised the fact of *dukkha* (misery) which had to be avoided and the *Brahma-vidya* emphasised the fact of *ananda* (joy) to be attained. The latter cult also needs for its fulfilment the discipline of self-abnegation, but it holds before its view the idea of Brahma, not only at the end but all through the process of realisation. Therefore, the idea of life's training was different in the *Vedic* period from that of the Buddhistic. In the former it was the purification of life's joy, in the latter it was the eradication of it. The abnormal type of asceticism to which Buddhism gave rise in India revelled in celibacy ... but the forest life of *Brahmana* was not antagonistic to the social life of man, but harmonious with it.<sup>82</sup>

Tagore's religious philosophy is one premised on a radical affirmation of the ideal of love. As he put it, 'no, in its passive moral form is asceticism and in its active moral form is violence ... the desert is as much a form of *himsa* as is the

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<sup>79</sup> Tagore, 'The Call of Truth', p. 421.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. p. 421.

<sup>81</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 5 March, 1921: Dutta and Robinson (eds.), *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 259.

<sup>82</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 5 March, 1921: Ibid. p. 259-260.

raging sea in storm', for 'they are both against life'.<sup>83</sup> This position is then linked clearly to Tagore's stance vis-à-vis the West: 'I believe in the true meeting of the East and the West. Love is the ultimate truth of the soul. We should do all we can, not to outrage that truth, to carry its banner against all opposition'.<sup>84</sup> Gandhi's response to this Tagorean position was to repeat his clear and direct *dharmic* injunction: 'Non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as co-operation with good'.<sup>85</sup>

Both Gandhi and Tagore agreed, then, that freedom was the ultimate aim, but in Tagore's eyes, Gandhi's *swaraj* placed too much emphasis on politicised forms of nationalism as the means by which it would achieve this end: Gandhi may not have claimed to be a political leader, but he played the game of politics. Tagore's argument was that despite naming freedom as his ultimate aim, in essence Gandhi's *satyagraha* was motivated by negative intentions, even hatred in some cases. It would naturally bring out violent and dark forces. As understandable as these may be, motivating men – or even allowing for the possibility that that they might be motivated – by negative forces could not lead to what Tagore had called 'the revealment of light'.

### **Class, caste and ideology**

To focus on the external dimensions of India's unfreedom was to miss the fact, as Tagore saw it, that freedom lies 'within'. Gandhi believed this too, but he reveals in himself a far more materialist frame of mind when he argued that he had difficulty, 'in imagining the possibility of a man having nothing but a bit of flint ... for lighting ... his matchlock ever singing new hymns of praise and delivering to an aching world a message of peace and goodwill upon earth'. 'A plea for the spinning wheel', Gandhi said 'is a plea for the dignity of labour'.<sup>86</sup> Again Gandhi, as was his often mischievous nature, allows himself to taunt Tagore, who could easily be portrayed as removed from the travails of the poor.<sup>87</sup> But is it the case that we are really talking about caste or even class here? Is Tagore's idealised vision of India the indulgent and aloof perspective of a wealthy landowner who may have never laboured a day in his life? Is Tagore's spiritual aesthetic merely an expression of his class consciousness and indifference to the plight of the Indian peasant?

The argument can easily be made. Towards the middle of the 1920s and certainly by the 1930s, a 'post-Tagore' period began to consolidate itself in Bengali literary society. The main focus of criticism was upon what fellow poets and writers saw as Tagore's apparent lack of interest in matters political, and more specifically social. The realism of Western modernists was admired as a cutting edge by means of which a poet or writer living and working under the colonial modernity of Calcutta could dig into the nitty-gritty of everyday life. Realism in literature became the twin of social reform in politics, illuminating the social

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<sup>83</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 5 March, 1921: Ibid. p. 260.

<sup>84</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 5 March, 1921: Ibid. p. 261.

<sup>85</sup> Gandhi, 'The Poet's Anxiety'. p. 67.

<sup>86</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, 'The Great Sentinel', in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed.), *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915-1941* (New Delhi: National Book Trust of India, 1921), p. 89.

<sup>87</sup> Even if his 'poetic licence' gave an excuse for others to dismiss his opinions, it also brought a degree of freedom which those engaged in the pragmatics of everyday politics didn't enjoy.

conditions that provided the impetus for the social reform agenda underpinning India's Gandhian inspired nationalism. Tagore's place in the new social realism was an unsettled one. Although novels such as *The Home and the World* and *Gora* sought to deal with the social world of modern Calcutta, the messages were complicated; often ambivalent about aspects of Indian family life, they could also have been said to lack a proper grip upon the pain and hardship of everyday life under colonialism. But from the perspective of intellectual history – if recovering past thought for its own sake is one of its objectives – then far more is lost than gained by deploying such politicised categories against Tagore.

I have already referred at some length to the importance Tagore placed on social endeavour. In light of this it is hard to sustain the charge of a callous indifference to the poor. Moreover, on the specific issue of caste and social reform, both Gandhi and Tagore adopted ambivalent positions. In spite of his well-known opposition to untouchability, Gandhi in fact wrote and spoke frequently in support of *Varna* and of caste, though he drew a distinction between the two. *Varna* was a simpler fourfold division of society into a priesthood (*Brahmin*), a warrior cadre (*Kshatriya*), a commercial or business group (*Vaishya*) and manual labourers (*Shudra*). 'The law of *Varna*', Gandhi wrote in an essay – also partly directed at Tagore – 'is intimately, if not indissolubly connected with birth, and the observance of the law of *Varna* means the following on the part of us all of the hereditary and traditional calling of our forefathers in a spirit of duty'.<sup>88</sup> Gandhi concluded that 'our failure to follow the law of *Varna* is responsible both for our spiritual and economic ruin'.<sup>89</sup> And although he drew an aggressive distinction at times ('Down with the monster of caste that masquerades in the guise of *Varna*. It is this travesty of *Varna* that has degraded Hinduism and India'<sup>90</sup>), he could be equally defensive of the system:

We in India have evolved caste: they in Europe have organised class ... if class helps to conserve certain social virtues, caste does the same in equal, if not greater, degree. The beauty of the caste system is that it does not base itself upon distinctions of wealth [or] possessions ... caste is but an extension of the principle of the family.<sup>91</sup>

Not only is '*Varna* the best form of insurance for happiness and for religious pursuit', Gandhi had claimed, but also '*a Shudra* who acquires the qualities of a Brahmin may not be called a *Brahmin* in his birth ... and it is a good thing for him not to arrogate a *Varna* to which he is not born'.<sup>92</sup>

Tagore's response to these kinds of assertions was in some senses economistic. He saw it as highly inefficient for people to be allocated to occupation by virtue of birth and felt that the persistence of hereditary occupations was destructive of an innovative quality of mind. The idea of *Varna*, Tagore claimed, where some were assigned lowly, and others high, occupations according to a hereditary principle, restricted human freedom. At present, the ideals, education,

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<sup>88</sup> *Harijan*, 28 September, 1934: Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi: Volume 6 - The Voice of Truth* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1968). p. 475.

<sup>89</sup> *Young India*, 24 November, 1927: *Ibid.* p. 479.

<sup>90</sup> *Young India*, 24 November, 1927: *Ibid.* p. 479.

<sup>91</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, 'Caste vs. Class': Om Prakash (ed.), *Encyclopaedic History of Indian Freedom Movement* (New Delhi: Anmol, 2001). p. 95.

<sup>92</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, *My Varnashrama Dharma* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1965). p. 57.

training and attitude of mind associated with castes such *Brahmin* and *Kshatriya* were 'nowhere to be found'.<sup>93</sup> '[T]his has come to mean that each caste must at all costs follow its traditional rules; which, again, in practical effect, is reduced to this, that the fixed external observances must be kept up, without reference to their significance or utility'.<sup>94</sup> To make improvements, even in the products of manual labour, 'the application of mind is necessary'. When that is 'destroyed by hereditary pursuit of the caste avocation, man is reduced to a machine, and can but keep on repeating himself'.<sup>95</sup> This theme of the clash between man and machine is thus a constant Tagorean trope, shaping his perspective on the founding organisational principles of modernity – nation and state – as well as economic activity and education. But it also reached down to his attitude to society, custom and religion: the ultimate good for Tagore was the freedom to realise the inner truth of man, and anything that prevented this – including the thoughtless and unquestioning repetition of dead custom – was to be resisted.

### **Compulsion and individual freedom**

When Gandhi visited Tagore's Shantiniketan school in 1915, he cajoled the students and teachers, largely against Rabindranath's will, to learn about self-help by enactment, that is, by cooking and cleaning for themselves. As Judith Brown puts it in her biography of Gandhi, 'the experiment was short-lived. But it demonstrated that wherever Gandhi went, even where he was most welcome and at home, his critical eye was on people's habits and relationships, and he could not rest content without attempting to reform according to his own ideals'.<sup>96</sup> This story takes us towards the issue of compulsion and individual freedom which lies at the heart of the disagreement between Gandhi and Tagore over nationalism and the nature of politics. As I have suggested, Tagore felt that the pursuit of *swaraj* that made Western political forms its objective, and which was motivated by negative forces (contempt for the British, the destruction of cloth and so on) was unacceptable. Tagore was deeply concerned with individual freedom too, that is, 'the final goal of a fully and completely lived human life'.<sup>97</sup> It was the inner self, and specifically self-realisation through the freedom of self-creation, that was central to the human experience. To this end he deplored the compulsions of instrumental rationality. Humans also expressed themselves in the world of work and labour. But Tagore felt that it was the inner sphere of the *creative impulse* – the 'abundance' or 'surplus', that wealth of creative capacity and fund of emotional energy – which takes the human beyond the realms of a mere concern with self-preservation. Tagore did not ask humans to abandon their social identity, for the truth of love was, as he repeatedly states, expressed through cooperation and unity. But the sphere of inner self must also be defended if we are to retain our humanity, if we are to avoid alienation from our true nature.

It was out of this concern that much of Tagore's fear of Gandhi and his movement came. In a letter sent to C. F. Andrews as early as July 1915, Tagore made the striking claim that 'only a moral tyrant like Gandhi can think that he has

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<sup>93</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Shudra Habit', *The Modern Review*, 41/3 (1927), p. 274.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* p. 274.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* p. 274.

<sup>96</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 98.

<sup>97</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'My Interpretation of India's History: II', *The Modern Review*, 14/3 (1913), p. 233.

the dreadful power to make his ideas prevail through the means of slavery'.<sup>98</sup> It is fitting that Andrews' biographer titled his work *The Ordeal of Love*, because Andrews' love was not an ordeal for him alone: Tagore often found his attentions cloying and suffocating. But he was devoted to Gandhi and Tagore in equal measure and desperately wanted the two to see eye to eye. So much so that when he came to publish Tagore's comments in his 1928 *Letters to a Friend* he removed all reference to Gandhi and left only the 'tyrant' in abstract form. The original letter is preserved in the Shantiniketan archives, and it is to this letter I refer here.<sup>99</sup> It suggests to us that in spite of Tagore's obvious admiration for Gandhi; in spite of the fact that it was Tagore himself who first gave Gandhi the name of Mahatma – the 'great soul' – he held deep seated reservations about Gandhi's intentions. 'It is absurd', Tagore wrote 'to think that you must create slaves to make your ideas free':

There are men of ideas who make idols of their ideas and sacrifice humanity before their altars. But in my worship of ideas I am not a worshipper of *Kali*. So the only course left open to me when my fellow-workers fall in love with form and fail to have complete faith in idea, is to go and give my idea new birth and create new possibilities for it. This may not be a practical method, but possibly it is the ideal one.<sup>100</sup>

The creative capacity of the individual, inner sphere was thus held in constant tension with the demands of the social, external world. I would suggest that Tagore's depiction of Gandhi as a 'moral tyrant' betrays his own fear not simply of demagogues, but of mass politics in general. It is the regimentation of individual behaviour in the process of the nationalist struggle, not simply the oppressive power inherent in the end goal of the nation state, that Tagore sees as inimical to freedom. Where Gandhi claimed that his non-cooperation movement was 'altering the meaning of old terms, nationalism and patriotism, and extending their scope', Tagore rejected the terms altogether.<sup>101</sup>

## THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF TAGORE

So far I have sought to establish that Tagore held a coherent position that rejected the modern Western nation-state as an organisational political form on the grounds that it was detrimental to the social world in which man could realise his true inner freedom. Tagore's position is more complex than the too frequently recycled remarks about Tagore the 'nationalist poet' suggest. It comprised a radical, extremist interpretation of 'active love' and a form of idealism that – in Tagore's eyes – ruled out some of the most carefully thought through moves towards non-cooperation made by Gandhi. What I want to show in this concluding section is that whilst Tagore's rejection of the nation-state and nationalism entailed the outright rejection of one of the core pillars of modernity, Tagore also held a deterministic theory of historical evolution which had structural affinities with

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<sup>98</sup> Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 7 July 1915: C. F. Andrews Correspondence Files, Tagore Papers, Rabindra Bhavana.

<sup>99</sup> Interestingly, the letter is left out of Dutta and Robinson's *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, possibly on the grounds that the editors did not want to replicate the material included in Andrews' *Letters to a Friend*. However, relying on Andrews has meant that the Gandhi reference has not yet come to light.

<sup>100</sup> Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 7 July 1915: C. F. Andrews Correspondence Files, Tagore Papers, Rabindra Bhavana.

<sup>101</sup> Bhattacharya (ed.), *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915-1941*. p. 63.

much nineteenth century philosophy of history. But, though idealist in its orientation, unlike Hegel, Tagore proposed that the coming age was one in which Asia – and specifically India – would take centre stage in the process of world historical development.

### **The lessons of India's history**

Tagore is quite explicit that the nation-state has no meaning in an Indian context. 'Take it in whatever spirit you like', he says, 'here is India, of about 50 centuries at least, who [sic] tried to live peacefully and think deeply, the India devoid of all politics, the India of no nations'.<sup>102</sup> It is in Tagore's presentation of Indian history – which is derived largely from readings of religious texts – that we begin to feel a clear and present assertion of cultural and spiritual superiority. Whilst Tagore holds to a 'universal truth', it emerges that for Tagore that truth has, thus far, been expressed most fully and clearly in Indian history, and this makes India of vital importance; central to the pathway out of a modern, globalised predicament of nationalist-driven imperialism and derivative anti-colonial nationalism.

In this sense, Tagore's particular brand of universalism required the radical rejection of liberal individualism and a utilitarian, positivist rationality in favour of collective social life and spiritual truth. But it also involved a different historical vision of the world's present situation and its future trajectory. In 1913, whilst Tagore was spending his second summer in England, he published 'My Interpretation of India's History'.<sup>103</sup> This essay, along with 'Race Conflict', also from 1912, advanced an interpretation of the historical juncture in which Tagore found himself which would be reiterated in numerous subsequent publications. As Tagore put it in his 1922 book *Creative Unity*<sup>104</sup> 'the most significant fact of modern days is this, that the West has met the East'.<sup>105</sup> As early as 1913, he was emphatic that the way in which this 'fact' of modernity would produce a positive outcome was by the West recognising, and learning from, the genius of India.

Referring to the *Mahabharata*, Tagore wrote that 'this book may not satisfy the modern European definition of history, but it is truly the history of the Aryans: it is a nation's [as in 'a people's']<sup>106</sup> self composed natural story'.<sup>107</sup> Indian history shows that India's 'mind' is unified by its 'orientation to that one final Truth, breathed in its *Gita*, the spirit of the vast unspeakable oneness of the national life'<sup>108</sup>:

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<sup>102</sup> Tagore, *Nationalism*. p. 50. Cf. Tagore, *Nationalism*. p. 51, 'we, who are no nation ourselves'.

<sup>103</sup> Published in two sections in consecutive issues, it had originally been written in Bengali in 1912.

<sup>104</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Creative Unity* (London: Macmillan, 1922). Subsequent references are to the previously referenced version in Sisir Kumar Das' edited collection.

<sup>105</sup> Tagore, 'Creative Unity'. p. 532.

<sup>106</sup> There is confusion in terms of Tagore's presentation of his own ideas, especially in essays in *The Modern Review*. Often the translator uses 'nation' when the sense that Tagore means is 'people'. This complicates things when Tagore explicitly positions himself against the idea of nation as 'nation-state' and the associated ideology of nationalism, but then uses phrases such as 'national life', or refers to 'the nation's' quality or power or history. I will attempt to make Tagore's intended usage clear where necessary.

<sup>107</sup> Tagore, 'My Interpretation of India's History: II'. p. 232.

<sup>108</sup> Understood as the life of 'a people', not in the modern sense of nation.

Through all its lucidity and mystery, its consistency and inconsistency, there always lurks the deeper perception that Truth embraces *all*, that there is *one* point where all agree ... the *Gita* shows how every aspect of human activity is completed and perfected when it is joined to the Vast, the Complete, the Universal.<sup>109</sup>

Tagore's theme is that Indian history is replete, *par excellence*, with examples of how the realisation of 'inner truth' behind the veil of the external world leads to the realisation of a greater unity. As well as the *Mahabharata*, Tagore drew freely on the *Ramayana* for the purposes of constructing his interpretation. He used, for example, the story of Lord Ram's efforts to conquer the non-Aryan peoples in pursuit of his abducted wife Sita. Ram was able to win over the monkey god Hanuman to help him in his search, and in this parable Tagore sees some of the core truths of Indian history. 'Ram', Tagore says 'conquered the monkeys not by a stroke of policy, but by inspiring them with the religion of personal devotion ... [t]hus, Hanuman's devotion raised him into a God'.<sup>110</sup> He juxtaposes politics, policy and war – the instrumental rationality of the state – with the life-world governed by religion: '[i]t was by religion alone ... [that] Ram conquered the non-Aryans and gained their devotion. He did not extend his empire by defeating them by force of arms'.<sup>111</sup> This is the lesson of Indian history, and it is in these ideals that we 'see the interaction of expansion and contraction, individuality and catholicity in India'.<sup>112</sup>

The ascendancy of religion is one theme in Indian history; the other is the capacity for the accommodation of difference. In India, the Aryan contact with the Dravidian 'formed a marvellous compound, which is neither entirely Aryan nor entirely non-Aryan'.<sup>113</sup> The combining of the Aryan and Dravidian elements was an 'eternal quest for the harmonising of these two opposite elements' which had 'given to India a *wondrous power*. She has learned to perceive the eternal amidst the temporal, to behold the Great Whole amidst all the petty things of daily life'.<sup>114</sup> This vision of Indian history was also a restatement of Tagore's dichotomy between societies that find the basis of their power in the realm of the state and politics on the one hand, and on the other, at the level of society and religion. Contrasting Asia as a whole with the West, Tagore sees in Asia a limited role for the state which has meant that, 'both in India and China the social system was always dominant, and [the] political system stood below it. Both the countries protected themselves by the collective power of the society'.<sup>115</sup> As Tagore put it elsewhere, 'the West survives by protecting the state, while our country lives on socially regulated conventions free from any state intervention'.<sup>116</sup> Kalyan Sen Gupta has usefully paraphrased Tagore's position – originally given in Bengali – thus:

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<sup>109</sup> Tagore, 'My Interpretation of India's History: II'. p. 233, italicisation, capitalisation and ellipsis all original.

<sup>110</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'My Interpretation of India's History: I', *The Modern Review*, 14/2 (1913), 113-18. p. 117.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* p. 117.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* p. 117.

<sup>113</sup> Tagore, 'My Interpretation of India's History: II'. p. 233.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* p. 233, my emphasis.

<sup>115</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Kalantar', *Rabindra Rachanabli: Sen Gupta, The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*. p. 39.

<sup>116</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Swadeshi Samaj: Ibid.* p. 40.



Kingdoms have risen and fallen, yet the country survived because it was self-sufficient and able to meet its people's economic and spiritual requirements. The country had always belonged to the people, while the king was only a relatively insignificant figurehead. In the politically oriented country, the heart lies in the political system: if it collapses, this means the death of the country. It is in this way that Greece and Rome met their end; the countries like India and China have survived in spite of political revolutions, since their souls are anchored in a stable society.<sup>117</sup>

Examples of this kind of thinking are omnipresent in Tagore's English language essays and books from about 1911 onwards, and they also feature heavily in Tagore's correspondence with C. F. Andrews as Tagore carefully explains, during the course of their evolving relationship, the purpose of his mission in the West and his antagonism towards Gandhi's practice of non-cooperation. As Tagore wrote to Andrews in 1921:

India ever has nourished faith in the truth of spiritual man, for whose realisation she has made innumerable experiments, sacrifices and penance, some verging on the grotesque and the abnormal. But the fact is, she has never ceased in her attempt to find it even though at the tremendous cost of material success. Therefore I feel that the true India is an idea, and not a mere geographical fact. I have come into touch with this idea in faraway places of Europe and my loyalty was drawn to it in persons who belonged to different countries from mine. *India will be victorious when this idea wins victory.*<sup>118</sup>

It hardly need be said that this is not Rankean history, but in an important sense it makes little difference whether Tagore's vision of India's past could or could not be substantiated. Tagore's history was about narrative and the elucidation of moral truths. Its facticity was not what was at stake. His was an idealised version of the past, deployed in philosophically idealist terms, at a crucial juncture in Indian history, and for strategic purposes. This tells us a great deal about his self-consciousness as an historical agent, intervening in debates about an evolving Indian sense of selfhood, as well as a cross-cultural, trans-imperial public sphere. Tagore's vision foregrounds India as an iconic emblem of a de-territorialised world in which manifest human difference can be managed through the realisation of the underlying unity behind the world of appearances. But he knew full well that this vision did not fit the actual circumstances in which he lived.

### **The small and the great (imperial ambivalence?)**

Nationalism, the centrality of politics, political forms and the nation state was at the heart of the regimentation and lust for power that he saw as leading to the 'death of humanity' in the West. Tagore's 1917 *Nationalism* – based on lectures delivered in America during some of the most atrocious battles on the Western front – does not actually pay explicit attention to the war, but the backdrop of imperialistic capitalist expansion and militarism permeate the book. As Tagore puts it:

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<sup>117</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Kalantar', *Rabindra Rachanabli*: Ibid. p. 39.

<sup>118</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 13 March, 1921: Bhattacharya (ed.), *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915-1941*. p. 61, my emphasis.

When with the help of science and the perfecting of organisation this power begins to grow and brings in harvests of wealth, then it crosses its boundaries with amazing rapidity. For then it goads all its neighbouring societies with greed of material prosperity, and consequent mutual jealousy, and by the fear of each other's growth into powerfulness. The time comes when it can stop no longer, for the competition grows keener, organisation grows faster, and selfishness attains supremacy.<sup>119</sup>

It was the territorialised and competitive sense of nationhood that was the driving force behind the greed for ever greater acquisition that he saw as the root cause of empire, the scramble for Africa and the 'Great War' of 1914-1918. In this sense, Harish Trivedi is quite wrong when he claims that Tagore 'confused' nationalism and imperialism.<sup>120</sup> Tagore's point was that the shift away from a social-religious form of life towards a state-political form – which embodied the transitions from 'peoples' to 'nations' – inevitably led to the aggressive, competitive and acquisitive practice of imperialism. To posit an analytical corollary between nationalism and imperialism is, in itself, nothing exceptional; nor is it to confuse the two.<sup>121</sup>

For Tagore, the Western nation is a modern organisational form linked to the emergence of instrumental rationality and symptomatic of a 'modern age'.<sup>122</sup> What was clear from Tagore's perspective was not simply the strong distinction between Eastern and Western historical experience but also the relative inferiority of the West. As Tagore put it, 'the teaching and example of the West have entirely run counter to what we think was given to India to accomplish'.<sup>123</sup> What seems to have confused so many of Tagore's readers and interpreters is that he could hold this view, and simultaneously insist that 'Europe too has a soul', and '[w]hen we discover Europe's spiritual core, we will discover its inner reality – something that is neither materialistic nor simply of the intellect, but is sheer joy of life'.<sup>124</sup> Was he for or against the West? It is not until one sees that Tagore held the question to be invalid that we can put his wider philosophical perspective in context. Tagore could hold *both* positions because his distinction between the real and the ideal allowed him to engage critically with the West without essentialising it. His philosophical position, which claimed that 'when we mistake the outward for the ultimate, we can neither perceive the soul nor feel happy about accepting the outward'<sup>125</sup>, allowed him to see in the West different streams of thought and practice, some negative and destructive and some positive (in Tagorean language 'truthful and spiritual').<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Tagore, *Nationalism*. p. 51.

<sup>120</sup> Trivedi, 'Nationalism, Internationalism and Imperialism: Tagore on England and the West'. p. 173.

<sup>121</sup> Cf. J. A. Cramb, *The Origins and Destiny of Imperial Britain and Nineteenth-Century Europe* (London: E. P. Dutton, 1915). p. 95. 'The Civic, the feudal, or the oligarchic State passes into the National, the National into the Imperial'.

<sup>122</sup> Tagore, 'Creative Unity'. pp. 538-543.

<sup>123</sup> Tagore, *Nationalism*. p. 49.

<sup>124</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Towards Universal Man* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1961). p. 162.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.* p. 162.

<sup>126</sup> 'We must first of all remind ourselves that wherever there is some good, there must be spiritual strength behind it ... if we see any progress in Europe, behind it indubitably is the power of the spirit; it cannot be the creation of dead matter'. *Ibid.* p. 161.

It is a commonly repeated error in the secondary literature to suppose that Tagore vacillated in terms of his attitude towards the West. In 1941, the last year of his life, Tagore wrote an essay entitled 'Crisis in Civilization', in which he expressed a deep scepticism about the liberating potential of Western modernity:

We have for over a century been dragged by the prosperous West behind its chariot, choked by the dust, deafened by the noise, humbled by our own helplessness, and overwhelmed by the speed. We agreed to acknowledge that this chariot drive was progress, and that progress was civilisation. If we ever ventured to ask 'progress towards what, and ... for whom?' it was considered to be peculiarly Oriental ... [yet] of late, a voice has come to us bidding us to take count [sic] not only of the scientific perfection of the chariot but of the depth of the ditches lying across its path.<sup>127</sup>

Harish Trivedi has argued that this final statement from Tagore, written shortly before his death, represents some kind of revelatory moment in which 'Tagore disabused himself of the civilisational supremacy of the West'.<sup>128</sup> But Tagore had never believed in any such thing. He had merely held that truth was not the preserve of any particular group of human beings. He had been as critical of the West at the turn of the century as he was in the last days of his life. As William Radice has quite rightly pointed out, 'Crisis in Civilisation' – what he calls 'Tagore's final bitter statement on the world' – did not in any way represent a final realisation or a *volte face*.<sup>129</sup> But Radice's reasons for arguing so are, I think, misleading. Radice suggests that Tagore had always been anti-imperial, hence his vehement criticism of the West in 1941 was nothing new.

That Tagore had ever been a fierce critic of *some aspects* of the West is clear. But if we are to accept somehow that Tagore had all along been a fierce critic of the West, and of empire, then it is difficult to make sense of a number of essays published in *The Modern Review*, which develop some of Tagore's most controversial arguments. Interestingly, some of the key essays – for example 'The Future of India' (1911); 'My Interpretation of India's History'<sup>130</sup> (1913); 'The Nation'<sup>131</sup> (1917); 'The Small and the Great' (1917); 'Thou Shalt Obey' (1917) – are excluded from Sisir Kumar Das' *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. This is not merely incidental. It illustrates the fact that in large part the world remains bifurcated by imperialist nationalism and its counterpart, anti-colonial nationalism. The essays that express a refusal of this division – essays that castigate the empty, soulless civilisation of the West whilst simultaneously chiding Indians for their narrow-mindedness and their failure to embrace the truth and

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<sup>127</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Crisis in Civilisation', in Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Volume Three* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1941), pp. 714.

<sup>128</sup> Trivedi, 'Nationalism, Internationalism and Imperialism: Tagore on England and the West'. p. 172.

<sup>129</sup> William Radice, 'Review of Manjula Bose (Ed.) L.K Elmhirst, 1893-1993 and R. K. Dasgupta, Our National Anthem', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 60/1 (1997), 163-64. p. 164.

<sup>130</sup> Sisir Kumar Das includes a revised version of this essay, re-written by Tagore following comments from Dwijendranath Tagore. Rabindranath Tagore, 'A Vision of India's History', in Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Volume Three* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1923), 439-58. The earlier version is more useful for understanding Tagore's reason for embarking on his mission to the West.

<sup>131</sup> Parts of this essay are included in *Creative Unity* (1922), but in a truncated and sanitised form.

beauty of spirit coming from the ‘great Englishman’ – continue to be marginalised. This will not help us to gain a better understanding of Tagore, nor will it assist us in recognising the unconventional ways in which Tagore confronted the predicament of modernity.

In ‘The Small and the Great’, Tagore appeals to the difference between the small Englishman, ‘who wields the weapon of obstruction’ and ‘is intoxicated with power, and out of touch with the life of India’ on account of ‘layer upon layer of accumulated official tradition’. To him, ‘India is but a government or Mercantile office’. He is contrasted with the ‘distant Englishman’, who ‘by reason of the free atmosphere of Europe is able to escape the illusions of blind self-interest and can see India with a breadth of vision’.<sup>132</sup> As with Tagore’s rendering of Indian history, it is not the accuracy of the picture so much as the spirit behind the vision that matters. In another essay, ‘Thou Shalt Obey’ – essentially a critique of what Tagore saw as an ‘Indian habit’ of blindly following tradition – Tagore makes further distinctions between different representation of ‘Britain’, ‘Englishmen’ and ‘the West’. Referring to the brutality of government in India and the violent backlash it wrought from the growing force of militant Indian nationalism, Tagore insisted that ‘we must bring about a compromise between the secret shame of the bureaucracy and our open defiance’. He pointed to the double standards of imperial rhetoric and reality: ‘the West boasts of democracy today. I have no wish to stir up the repulsive mire which is still so plentiful beneath the surface glamour of the Western peoples’.<sup>133</sup> But he insisted that ‘England came here as the responsible representative of European civilisation, and if [t]he message of that civilisation is the word she has plighted’, then ‘[t]his, her only title to empire, shall be glorified by us. We shall never let her forget that she has not crossed the seas to slice India up into fragments’.<sup>134</sup>

Tagore held that ‘in spite of all risk of error or mischance we must have self-government’. He did not wish to sit in the waiting room of history. But *self-government* required paying attention to the self. If the British Empire was to have a positive effect in India – and Tagore believed it could<sup>135</sup> – then the same ideal of self-government or autonomy must be applied, by Indians, to their own social practices. Tagore bemoaned the invocation by his contemporaries of ‘*Kali yuga*’, in which ‘the intellect of man is [seen as] feeble and liable to make mistakes if left free, so that we had better bow our head to *Shastric* conjunctions’.<sup>136</sup> What was required was mutuality: ‘where we are greater, where we are brave, where we are self-denying, devoted and reverential, there we shall find ourselves in touch with the best in our rulers’.<sup>137</sup> Perhaps most provocatively, Tagore asserted that ‘the weak can be as great an enemy of the strong as the strong of the weak’.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘The Small and the Great’, *The Modern Review*, 22/6 (1917), p. 597.

<sup>133</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Thou Shalt Obey’, *The Modern Review*, 22/3 (1917), p. 339.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.* p. 338.

<sup>135</sup> Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan wrote in 1918 that ‘Empire in the sense of the Federation of the free, is the ideal of Britain, and it has a hearty approval and sympathy of Rabindranath Tagore, as of all right-thinking men’. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Macmillan, 1918). pp. 268-269. The author published the book with Macmillan and noted in the Preface (p. viii) that ‘the poet has been pleased to express his appreciation of this interpretation of his philosophy’.

<sup>136</sup> Tagore, ‘Thou Shalt Obey’, p. 332.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.* p. 337.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.* p. 337. Earlier, Tagore had written: ‘we are responsible for the failure of the English to fully unfold in India whatever is best in their race ... we must gain strength of

When we read these essays, Tagore's controversial legacy becomes all the more clear. But these essays – as embarrassing as they no doubt seem in some respects – are entirely consistent with Tagore's radical worldview. His point was not that he felt the British Empire brought good governance, or law and order, or railways. It was that whoever so ruled India was – at a fundamental level – a matter of little importance. A concern with politics – what Tagore acerbically called the 'begging method', which he felt even Gandhi was engaged in – was not simply a distraction, it was anathema to the social-spiritual core of India. In this regard, Tagore adopted a view of Indian history which suggested that India 'belongs' to no one. He spoke of 'the Supreme Architect who is ever building human society wider and wider from a narrow centre to a vast circumference', and claimed that 'it is a mistake to imagine that God's court attaches any importance to the question as to who will own India,– you or I, Hindu or Musalman or any other race that may set up its dominion here'.<sup>139</sup> Don't be under the illusion, he says, that 'when the case is finally decided, one party – Hindu, Musalman, English or any other race,– will get a full decree and set up its banner of ownership on the land'.<sup>140</sup> What Tagore required from India was for it to 'mark out the middle path of truth' and to 'know of a verity that it is idle mendicancy to discard our own and beg for the foreign'. At the same time 'we shall feel that it is the extreme abjectness of poverty to dwarf ourselves by rejecting foreign'.<sup>141</sup>

Tagore felt that anti-colonial nationalism was in essence an aspiration to mimic the very *worst traits* of Western civilisation. Returning to the comparison between Tagore and Gandhi, Gandhi also understood that political, state-seeking nationalism could not be an end in itself, and so built his vision of a future India not on the Western nation-state model – which would finally come to fruition under Nehru – but as a rural society of self-governing communities. On this much Tagore and Gandhi agreed. But Tagore went further. To motivate the masses on the basis of rejection – on the basis of a negative attitude, of boycotts and burnings – meant that Gandhi was trying to buy freedom at what Tagore called a 'cheap price'. Calling to mind not Gandhi, but the ironies of the *swadeshi* movement, Tagore wrote that:

[t]he boycott of Manchester ... had raised profits of the Bombay mill-owners to a super-foreign degree. And then I had to say: "This will not do, either; for it is also of the outside. Your main motive is hatred of the foreigner, not love of country." It was then necessary for our countrymen to be made conscious of the distinction, that the Englishman's presence is an external accident ... but that the presence of our country is an internal fact which is also an eternal truth.<sup>142</sup>

In this vein, Tagore had long held that 'alien government in India is a veritable chameleon. Today it comes in the guise of the Englishman; tomorrow perhaps as

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every kind; then only can the English give us that which they have come here to impart. So long as they despise us, our union with them is impossible, and we must again and again return empty-handed from their doors'. 'If we say that India has stimulated to an extreme the Englishman's cupidity, haughtiness, cowardice or cruelty, then it will not do to cast the blame for it on the English, we must bear the major portion of the offence'. Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Future of India', *The Modern Review*, 9/3 (1911), 238-44. p. 243.

<sup>139</sup> Tagore, 'The Future of India'. p. 239.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. p. 239.

<sup>141</sup> Tagore, 'My Interpretation of India's History: II'. p. 236.

<sup>142</sup> Tagore, 'The Call of Truth'. p. 413.

some other foreigner; the next day it may take the shape of our own countrymen'.<sup>143</sup> Alien government was 'government by the nation', conducted by 'small Englishmen'. This form of government gave primacy to the state and to politics and was a force resistant to the unfolding of the ideal.

But what does this mean for the idea of anti-colonial resistance, or for nationalism in its political form? Gandhi had a clear theory *and* practice of resistance. Tagore rejects Gandhi's methods. So how is freedom to be achieved in the Tagorean sense? Tagore's essential point is that social and political action should only be realised in terms of its adherence to universal truth. Universal truth cannot – by definition, of course – be restricted to family, community, society or nation. It must include a love of humanity. For this reason nationalism cannot be a means of achieving freedom for its exclusivism and territorial chauvinism is the very negation of what Tagore claimed to be the moral law: the unity of man.

For Tagore, then, the method by which India will escape its situation of subjugation and dependency is via a recovery of its own traditions: a recovery of self. That tradition did not lie, according to Tagore, in the realm of politics and the state – and least of all in what he saw as the explicitly modernist ideology of nationalism – but rather in the ideals of collective social responsibility. This kind of utopian ideal – the spontaneous, creative, affective bonds of the social world – was a kind of imagining which rested, as previously mentioned, on a particular interpretation of India's history, and constituted not only a critical intervention in the debate surrounding an emergent Indian nationalism (whether Tagore liked it or not) but also related to what Indian civilisation could offer to the world.

Tagore did not waver from his critique of the modern nation and the ideology of nationalism. His wrath was reserved for Indians and the British alike, and he was a consistent defender of what he saw to be the truth, which bore no relation to caste, creed or nation. Thus, even after the Amritsar Massacre, which prompted Tagore's impassioned renunciation of his knighthood in disgust, he wrote to C. F. Andrews: 'Let us forget the Punjab affairs, but never forget that we shall go on deserving such humiliation over and over again until we set our own house in order. Do not mind the waves of the sea, but mind the leaks in your own vessel'.<sup>144</sup> At the height of the non-cooperation movement, and in spite of the extreme brutality of the British response, Tagore still declared that Gandhi's 'pugnacious spirit of resentment' was 'a mere emptiness of negation'.<sup>145</sup> Even more so than Gandhi, Tagore rejected the political in favour of the social and religious. Deploring, yet again, the instrumentalisation taking place in the political sphere, Tagore wrote that 'even today our worldly-wise men cannot get rid of the idea of utilising the Mahatma as a secret and more ingenious move in their political gamble. With their minds corroded by untruth, they cannot understand what an important thing it is that the Mahatma's supreme love should have drawn forth the country's love'. Despite his extreme demands, Tagore had enormous belief in Gandhi's ability to lead India in a moral direction. In light of Gandhi, Tagore says that 'what has happened in India is nothing less than the birth of freedom':

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid. pp. 413-414.

<sup>144</sup> Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 7 September 1920: Dutta and Robinson (eds.), *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*. p. 237.

<sup>145</sup> Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 7 September 1920: Ibid. p. 237.

It is the gain by the country of itself. In it, there is no room for any thought as to where the Englishman is, or is not. This love is self-expression. It is pure affirmation. It does not argue with negation: *it has no need for argument*.<sup>146</sup>

I read this as an attempt by Tagore to completely sidestep not only the problem of nationalism but also of politics itself. 'The way of bloody revolution', Tagore added, 'is not the true way, a political revolution is like taking a short cut to nothing'.<sup>147</sup> This may have been Tagore's answer to the 'two vital questions about the search for liberation in our times' that Ashis Nandy sees as being prefigured by Franz Fanon's work: 'namely, why dictatorships of the proletariat never end and why revolutions always devour their children.'<sup>148</sup>

### India at the centre

But the idea that the birth of India's freedom is 'self-expression', which has 'no need for argument' is also, in a deeper sense, the expression of a central element of Tagore's philosophy. Freedom is already immanent in the world. It is there because God is there. All that is required, Tagore says, is the realisation that this is the truth. In this sense – though I am not suggesting any kind of 'influence' – Tagore's position has a great deal of affinity with the Christian idea that man's salvation has already occurred through the sacrifice of Christ. All that is required is for it to be recognised as the truth. This argument is couched both in idealistic terms and in the modernist language of determinism. Although Tagore sees a strong role for human agency in advancing or retarding the progress of history, history has its own prevailing logic. What is, I think, quite extraordinary (and potentially quite confusing) is that having declared that 'where the Englishman is, or is not', is of no fundamental concern, Tagore also saw the fulfilment of an historical telos in the presence of the English in India. The key to making sense of this is that Tagore demanded a focus on 'internal truth' as distinct from 'external form', but the struggle with external form (*maya*) was often a necessary pathway to truth.

In his 1911 essay 'The Future of India', he wrote that 'the English have battered down our shaky door and entered our house like the messengers of the world's Feastgiver in order to kindle among us the new energy'.<sup>149</sup> This appears at first sight to be a familiar Orientalist trope in which the West awakens the East from its slumber with its scientific, 'active' bent of mind. Tagore continues in the same vein: 'the English have been sent (by the Most High) on a mission, viz., to prepare that India which sprouted in the Past and is now developing its branches towards the Future'.<sup>150</sup> But then there is a surprising twist. We do not find India awakened by England, but rather England, in a cosmic vision of humanity, absorbed by India:

India is the India of all humanity,— what right have we to exclude the English from that India before the time is ripe for it? ... those who will one day be able to say with perfect truth "*we* are India, *we* are Indians," all (whether Hindus, Muslims, Englishmen or any other race) who will join that undivided

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<sup>146</sup> Tagore, 'The Call of Truth'. p. 418.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid. p. 416.

<sup>148</sup> Ashis Nandy, 'The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self', *Bonfire of Creeds: The Essential Ashis Nandy* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 451-452.

<sup>149</sup> Tagore, 'The Future of India'. p. 240.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid. p. 240, original emphasis.

vast 'we' and be incorporated within it,— they and they alone will have the right to order who should stay in India and who should go out of it.<sup>151</sup>

The determinism of Tagore's view is further elaborated. Contact with the English must 'bear its true fruit' and 'we must fulfil the purpose of our connection with the English'.<sup>152</sup> If we 'turn our face aside, if we isolate ourselves, if we refuse to accept any new element, we shall still fail to resist the march of Time, we shall fail to impoverish and defraud Indian history'.<sup>153</sup> In 1913 he would reiterate the same point: where 'India always seeks for the one amidst many' history may have 'strewn her path with insurmountable barriers', but 'her genius is sure, by its native power, to emerge successfully'.<sup>154</sup> Indian history 'has no less an object that this,— that here the history of man will attain to a special fulfilment and give an unprecedented form to its perfection, and make that perfection the property of all mankind'.<sup>155</sup>

What becomes clear is not simply that Tagorean philosophy is grounded in the ideal of universal man, but that India itself, its civilisation and its history, lies at the centre of an unfolding historical ideal. It is expressed fully and clearly in the following extract from one of Tagore's 1917 lectures on nationalism, given in the United States:

Our only intimate experience of the nation is the British nation, and so far as government by the nation goes, there are reasons to believe that it is one of the best. Then, again, we have to consider that the West is necessary to the East. We are complementary to each other, because of our different outlooks upon life, which have given us different aspects of truth. Therefore if it be true that the spirit of the West has come upon our fields in the guise of a storm, it is, all the same, scattering living seeds that are immortal. And when in India we shall be able to assimilate in our life what is permanent in the Western civilisation, we shall be in a position to bring about a reconciliation of those two great worlds. Then will come to an end the one-sided dominance which is galling. What is more, we have to recognise that the history of India does not belong to one particular race, but it is the history of the process of creation to which various races of the world contributed — the Dravidians and the Aryans, the ancient Greeks and the Persians, the Mohammadans of the West and those of Central Asia. Now that at last has come the turn of the English to bring to it the tribute of their life, we neither have the right nor the power to exclude them from their work of building the destiny of India.<sup>156</sup>

This rejection of 'the way of bloody revolution' has made it all too easy to dismiss Tagore as a 'moderate'. But as I have aimed to show, Tagore was even more uncompromisingly and radically idealistic than Gandhi. He insisted that:

our fight is a spiritual fight, it is for Man. We are to emancipate Man from the meshes that he himself has woven round him, — these organisations of National Egoism ... We, the famished, ragged ragamuffins of the East, are to

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid. p. 240, original emphasis.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid. p. 240.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid. pp. 240-241.

<sup>154</sup> Tagore, 'My Interpretation of India's History: II'. p. 236.

<sup>155</sup> Tagore, 'The Future of India'. p. 239.

<sup>156</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Cult of Nationalism': *Literatus*, 'Rabindranath Tagore in America', *Ibid.* 21/6 (1917), p. 666.



win freedom for all Humanity. We have no word for Nation in our language.<sup>157</sup>

For Tagore, the nationalist movement of the 1920s and 1930s placed India in a vertiginous position with much to gain, but equally much to lose. The drive for self-determination and for 'national self-respect', was, according to Tagore, 'making us turn our faces towards the world and demand political authority, but ... also making us turn our faces backwards to our country and demand that in all religious, social and political, and even personal matters we do not move one step against the Master's will.' This, he felt, was in some respects 'an impossible task: to keep one of our eyes wide open and the other one closed in sleep'.<sup>158</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

What emerges from my discussion of Tagore's critique of nationalism is the extent to which Tagore held a deep belief in the superiority of Indian civilisation's 'social-religious model' over the West's political 'nation-state model'. What is significant is that Tagore's position, and the kinds of terminology and concepts that he deploys, renders problematic the distinctions brought forth by Said's indictment of Orientalism and the common postcolonial identification of discourses of power based around ideas of progress, universalist-reason, historical laws and so on. How are we to situate Tagore in this insistent discourse of modernity? I suggest that it is a difficult, and in some ways unnecessary task, and by way of conclusions would like to provide some illustrations of how some attempts to do so have yielded counter-productive results.

The comparison between Gandhi and Tagore is of relevance to the ideas developed in postcolonial literature, for Gandhi has figured prominently here, especially in work dealing with Indian history and anti-colonial resistance strategies. In Partha Chatterjee's brief comparison in his essay on 'Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society'<sup>159</sup>, he states that the consequence of the violence in the Punjab in 1919 was that Gandhi came to a 'new realisation ... of the fundamental incompatibility of political action informed solely by a negative consciousness with the procedural norms of a bourgeois legal order'.<sup>160</sup> But what Chatterjee's account does not illustrate is the way in which Gandhi's ideas were developed within the context of a debate with Tagore about the nature of freedom.

I tried to show that Gandhi's struggles with the theory and practice of non-cooperation should be seen in the context of his debates with Tagore. But it is not simply that Tagore is conspicuously absent from the postcolonial narrative: Tagore appears, fleetingly, but as a foil for that which Gandhi was not. The 'Gandhian

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<sup>157</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 2 March, 1921: Bhattacharya (ed.), *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915-1941*. p. 55. With regard to Tagore's universal message, Tapati Dasgupta turns back to Tagore's Brahmo inheritance, and specifically to Keshub: 'how deeply Keshub Chandra Sen's ideas influenced Rabindranath's thinking is difficult to say, but the virtual identity of their idea that Asia had a message for the West could scarcely be a coincidence'. Tapati Dasgupta, *Social Thought of Rabindranath Tagore: A Historical Analysis* (New Delhi: Abhinav, 1993). p. 8.

<sup>158</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, speech to a Calcutta audience, 1917: Dutta and Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*. p. 9.

<sup>159</sup> Partha Chatterjee, 'The Moment of Manoeuvre: Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society': Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. pp. 85-130.

<sup>160</sup> Partha Chatterjee, 'The Moment of Manoeuvre: Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society': *Ibid.* p. 105.

self', which Chatterjee and others have aimed to recover, is constructed around a 'Tagorean other'. For example, Chatterjee makes a strong case for *not* seeing Gandhian politics as explicable under the umbrella of 'romanticism' since, unlike romanticism Gandhi's ideas and practice were 'not conceived at all within the thematic bounds of post-Enlightenment thought'.<sup>161</sup> With this I would mostly agree. But the contrasting case that Chatterjee uses is unhelpful. He refers to the 'modernists' of Gandhi's time, 'perhaps the most illustrious of these being Rabindranath Tagore'. Chatterjee argues that 'Gandhi shared neither the spiritual anguish nor indeed the aestheticism of these literary romantics of his time'.<sup>162</sup> Here, on the basis of the well-worn platitudes concerning Tagore – poet, aesthete, romanticist, modernist – the Tagore-Gandhi thread ends, without further examination. Few historians or political scientists have thought to pick up that thread and examine it more carefully.<sup>163</sup> But Gandhi juxtaposed with Tagore is a construction of false opposites, set up on the basis of differences that were less significant than their points of agreement, and too often thoughtlessly reproduced through the secondary literature.<sup>164</sup> Moreover, not only is the alleged dissimilarity between the two over-stated (consider Gandhi's statement that 'through the realisation of the freedom of India, I hope to realise and carry on the mission of brotherhood of men'<sup>165</sup>), but the acceptance of an opposition in which Tagore is caricatured as the 'modernist' has meant that Tagore's position – which in many ways was even more radical than that of Gandhi's – has been suppressed.

Gandhi performs a similar function for Ashis Nandy in his book on Tagore and nationalism. Nandy claims that Tagore and Gandhi – as with all other 'Afro-Asian reformers' – had tried to grapple with and reconcile 'three basic sets of contradictions or oppositions: that between the East and the West; that between tradition and modernity; and that between the past and present'.<sup>166</sup> In the case of Tagore, these oppositions are primarily dealt with in the realm of 'high culture' – that is, within India's classical Sanskrit traditions – albeit 'leavened on the one hand by elements of European classicism, including aspects of the European Renaissance, and on the other by India's own diverse folk or little traditions'. In other words, in Tagore's world, 'modernity had a place', whereas in the case of Gandhi, 'resolution of the contradictions was possible primarily within the little

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<sup>161</sup> Partha Chatterjee, 'The Moment of Manoeuvre: Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society': Ibid. p. 99.

<sup>162</sup> Partha Chatterjee, 'The Moment of Manoeuvre: Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society': Ibid. p. 100.

<sup>163</sup> A notable exception is 'Gandhi and Tagore: Where the Twain Meet': Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Perceptions, Emotions and Sensibilities: Essays on India's Colonial and Postcolonial Experiences* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006). pp. 141-151.

<sup>164</sup> For example, Harish Trivedi's essay on Tagore, part of which deals with Gandhi, is based on recycling established positions rather than examining the primary sources. Trivedi quotes Nehru's comment that 'no two persons could differ so much as Gandhi and Tagore', but does not probe into the primary literature to substantiate this interpretation. Incidentally, the Nehru quotation is taken by Trivedi from Krishna Kripalani's biography which is one of the most flawed biographies of Tagore in circulation, stressing Tagore's alleged, though unsubstantiated, western leanings in a wholly unwarranted and unqualified way. See Trivedi, 'Nationalism, Internationalism and Imperialism: Tagore on England and the West'. p. 174, footnote 11.

<sup>165</sup> M. K. Gandhi, Young India, 14 April, 1929: Bhattacharya (ed.), *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915-1941*. p. 30.

<sup>166</sup> Nandy, 'The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self'. p. 153.

traditions of India and the West, and occasional imports from Indian and Western classicism, *but almost entirely outside modernity*.<sup>167</sup>

It is a limited interpretation that seeks to place Gandhi outside the framework of what is loosely termed 'post-Enlightenment' thought (Chatterjee) or 'modernity' (Nandy) and sees Tagore as a 'modernist' counterpoint. Nandy admits as much, at least implicitly, when he almost immediately complicates his own division between the two men by saying that 'despite being a modernist, Tagore began to make less and less sense to the modern world in his lifetime. He ended as a critic of the modern West and, by implication, of modernity'.<sup>168</sup> Tagore's debates with Gandhi about the non-cooperation movement revealed within Tagore an extreme and demanding utopian vision of India's liberation struggle. Tagore's incessant critique of India's social and religious conservatism or his claim that 'the best Englishmen are the best specimens of humanity'<sup>169</sup> were Tagore's way of thumbing his nose at all those who succumbed to the disciplinary logic of the modern paradigm – the nation-state – and forever rebutting its conventional wisdom.

As we have seen, Tagore offered a quite specific critique of the nation-state which centred on the ascendancy of politics over the social world, which should be governed by religion. India was a living representative of this higher system, in danger of losing its own self in the process of a potentially pyrrhic victory in the 'freedom struggle'. Tagore credited Gandhi with a model of resistance that sought 'to make the country our own by dint of our own creative power', but for Tagore this had to be achieved through constructive engagement.<sup>170</sup> Non-cooperation was too much like the 'begging method' of the Indian National Congress which Tagore frequently mocked. This can easily be read as a form of 'moderation' or 'collaboration', explicit or implicit.<sup>171</sup>

Tagore's position was far more complex than these critics are willing to recognise. He held that the practice of imperialism had severely weakened the British.<sup>172</sup> It was a corrupting force, and had degraded the coloniser as much as the

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid. p. 154, my emphasis.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid. p. 154.

<sup>169</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 10 April, 1921: Dutta and Robinson (eds.), *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*. p. 517. This statement, of course, is not to be read as 'better than' but 'among the best'. For a somewhat facetious misrepresentation of Tagore as 'recognizably an Anglophile' see Trivedi, 'Nationalism, Internationalism and Imperialism: Tagore on England and the West'. p. 166. The paragraph beginning 'Only Jawaharlal Nehru of all our national leaders came from a family comparatively affluent and anglicised' is particularly misleading.

<sup>170</sup> Tagore, 'The Call of Truth'. p. 417.

<sup>171</sup> One of the more amusing instances of this is a 1922 review of *The Home and the World* by George Lukács entitled 'Tagore's Anti-Gandhi Novel'. The author of the review, rather embarrassingly, mistook the novel's violence-obsessed nationalist Sandip for Gandhi, and consequently labelled Tagore 'an intellectual agent in the struggle against the Indian freedom movement'. George Lukács, 'Tagore's Gandhi Novel', *Essays and Reviews* (London: Merlin Press, 1983).

<sup>172</sup> 'The greatest danger is when Europe deludes herself into thinking that she is helping the cause of humanity by helping herself, that men are essentially different, and that what is good for her people is not good for others who are inferior. Thus Europe is gradually and imperceptibly losing faith in her ideals and weakening her own supports'. Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 11 July 1915: Andrews Correspondence Files, Tagore Papers, Rabindra Bhavana. As Stephen Howe has put it, the idea of 'a fundamental incompatibility between the spirit of liberty at home and dictatorial rule in the colonies, and that only by dismantling the Empire could the British return to their own better traditions and values, was common to anti-

colonised. This was a position Gandhi had articulated in *Hind Swaraj* as early as 1909. But, on the basis that the ultimate truth was in essence love, cooperation and harmony, Tagore held that overcoming the colonial situation should not be attempted by any method other than a self-referential renaissance that did not make petition or resistance to the colonial power its means, nor the imitation of Western political forms its end. Tagore refused the simple binaries of modernity and tradition, imperialism and nationalism that we continue to rely upon for our intellectual shorthand. I have a good deal of sympathy for Gandhi's position throughout his exchanges with Tagore, but surely it is a diminution of our understanding if we lose sight of the historical context in which Gandhi worked out his ideas on non-cooperation and *swaraj*. This was a dialogic ideational context of which Tagore – almost entirely overlooked by commentators on Gandhi's political thought – was a very important part. In this sense recovering Tagore can also help us to better understand Gandhi. It is in this sense that we are reminded that a fuller picture of the intellectual history of any historical period requires actors and ideas to be situated within a wider framework.

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colonialist thinkers from Gandhi to C. L. R James or George Padmore ... imperialism, on this view, was not merely a symptom of British liberalism's and later socialism's alleged domestic shortcomings, but was their main course'. Stephen Howe, 'Internal Decolonization? British Politics since Thatcher as Post-Colonial Trauma', *Twentieth Century British History*, 14/3 (2003), p. 287-288.

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