



## Tagore in the time of war 1913-1919

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*Ideas and influence of poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore during the First World War*

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*Marking 100 years of Tagore's lectures, delivered in Japan and USA, published in 1917 under the title 'Nationalism?'*

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'In wartime when the Czar of all Russia [has] lost his throne without a word and Kaiser's crown looks terribly insecure' that I should be drawn into politics does not in the least degree prove that politics of late has developed undreamt of poetical qualities? it only shows that at present in India things have come to such a tangle that even a poet had to be requisitioned for the purpose of a mock fight in a political playground'

-Rabindranath Tagore, 1917<sup>[1]</sup>

When Tagore won the Nobel prize in literature for *Gitanjali* or *Song Offerings* in 1913, the first non-European to do so, he was a rage in the West and, then, he was not. His friend Ernest Rhys, writing in 1915 said, 'India greatly appreciated the honour'. As for Tagore, himself overwhelmed by the publicity, he admitted to feeling like his 'shelter' had been taken away (Rhys 1915: xiv). Rabindranath was one of the thirteen children born to Debendranath Tagore and Sarada Devi, in Kolkata in 1861. He belonged to a prominent family of philosophers and religious reformers that occupied an influential position in Bengal. Although Tagore is best known for his poetry, he was also an accomplished novelist, artist, dramatist, essayist and made prolific music compositions. His work gained international prominence just as the winds of nationalism and mutual distrust

swept across the European continent and morphed into a conflict in 1914. The poet saw the oncoming war as an assault on humanity and explored its political and cultural consequences through his writings. European intellectuals and literary figures who witnessed the war's brutality at their shores sought 'insights coming from elsewhere' and for many, Tagore's voice 'fit the need splendidly' (Sen 2011). India's own engagement with the war was complex. The country, then a part of the British Empire, supplied the Allies with thousands of troops and its main political organisation, the Indian National Congress, while being 'overtly supportive of the war?', was also 'willing to protest and exploit its consequences'. This article is a study of the complexity of those circumstances and Tagore's own experience of the war as he moved from being 'readily co-opted' for Anglo-imperial propaganda to becoming an independent force against the war and colonialism. The importance of Tagore lies in the capacity of his poetry and writings to 'anticipate and contribute' to the political changes they 'provoked' (Featherstone 2013: 182). As Nandy has argued, 'Tagore was an insider'. In rejecting Tagore, one risks rejecting an 'important part of the modern consciousness' in India (Nandy 1994: 4).

First World War poetry is said to have some 'classic features' such as: the 'lyric testimony of the broken body?mouth, eyes, the 'gashed' head'set against the abstract rhetoric of honour'. It can be argued that a lack of conformity to the 'British constructions of war memory of the dominant model of the trench lyric' has reduced the space for archipelagic and colonial poetry. There is also a 'neat' alignment of the words with moral agendas which are often bound up in the 'politics of cultural memory' (Das 2013b, 2013: 26). For instance, during the war years in Germany, Tagore's works were advertised with those of novelist Franz Werfel to project their 'humanity and pacifism?', and by 1915 Tagore came to be idolised as the 'poet of peace in the noblest sense of the word' (Kaempchen 2012). In another instance, Tagore's poetry, 'When I go from hence, let this be my parting word??', was found in the pocket book of Wilfred Owen, himself a famous Great War poet.<sup>[2]</sup> In the context of the war, Tagore thought that India's own multicultural past could offer something valuable to both contemporary India and the world. He found many things to say, some very practical... Nevertheless, the 'listening in the West [was] firmly tuned to more other-worldly themes' and as soon as these ideas fell from favour, he found himself marginalised (Tagore et al. 1997: xviii). This explains a part of the puzzle in understanding his forgotten place in Great War memory.

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

Above is an excerpt from a poem that Tagore wrote on the last day of the nineteenth century.<sup>[3]</sup> Recalling Tagore's departure from England in 1913, Rhys narrated how 'amid the bustle of the railway platform at Euston station?he spoke with concern of the need for a better understanding between his people and ours' (Rhys 1915: 158). That same year in his book, *Sadhana*, Tagore pointed to the increasing aggression in the West: 'they are ever disciplining themselves to fight Nature and other races; their armaments are getting more and more stupendous every day; their machines, their appliances, their organisations are forever multiplying'. He cautioned about the winds of fury again in a 1914 meeting with Rhys where the major energies, he said, were not constructive as they did not make for the 'world's commonwealth?', and would therefore, by nature, 'come into conflict sooner or later' (Rhys 1915: ix, viii). The day after war broke out, Tagore who was at Shantiniketan in Kolkata at that time, gave a lecture titled 'Ma ma hingsi' that emphasised the necessity of abstaining from violence and the meaninglessness of war (Bhattacharya 2013: 72).

Tagore was aware of the war enthusiasm that pervaded all spheres in the early years. He referred to it in his poem, *The Trumpet*, 'Ah, the evil day! Come fighters, carrying your flags and singer with your songs?! In a 1915 letter to his friend, Robert Bridges, Tagore wrote, 'I know what this war is to you' Please let Mrs. Bridges accept my heartfelt sympathy and reverence [for one] whose son is fighting for the cause of liberty in one of the

greatest wars in the history of mankind (Tagore et al. 1997: 172). Tagore's sense of a 'moral' standing was, at this point, clearly with the Allies. In fact, in 1915 Tagore's relationship with British officials in India was closer than with Indian nationalists like Gandhi and it was in June of the same year that he was honoured with knighthood. The reality in India, however, was that the coming of the First World War presented a political opportunity (rather than militarism) and, like most of the educated middle-class, Tagore found himself at a 'fragile point' between a 'residual loyalty to the empire' and a rising 'nationalist consciousness' (Das 2014).<sup>[4]</sup> Take for instance his 1916 decision to decline an invitation to speak in Vancouver as he disagreed with Canada's immigration laws that discriminated against Indians. In another instance that same year, in a *Modern Review* essay, he wrote of his hope that Bengali youth be taken as volunteers in the British Expeditionary Force. His belief was that 'if we could sacrifice our lives so I thought? in the same cause with the English soldiers, we should at once become real to them, and claim fairness at their hands ever after' (ScoTs; Featherstone 2013: 180).<sup>[5]</sup>

Tagore's idea of nationalism was distinct in that he rarely separated it from internationalism. In a 1917 letter to Sir William Rothenstein, Tagore wrote, 'some critics have taxed me with having misunderstood the meaning of the word 'nation' 'Certainly it is based on the idea of competition, conflict and conquest and not that of cooperation. In human language, there are very few words that have an absolute meaning' (Tagore et al. 1997: 188). Even as his later poems of 1918 were 'relocated in broader currents of anti-imperialist activism' and his own criticism for British colonial rule in India grew more intense, he continued to dissociate his criticism of the Raj from 'any denigration' of British or Western people and culture (Bhattacharya 2013: 71; Featherstone 2013: 181). Das argues that it is this mixing up of war, languages and other histories which are locally more charged than the war that stretch our understanding of the term 'First World War poetry' (Das 2013: 27)

In his book, *Nationalism*, which this article commemorates, Tagore bluntly said, 'Nationalism is a great menace'. He viewed the European war of nations as the 'war of retribution'. He felt that the 'time has come, for the sake of the whole outraged world, Europe should fully know in her own person the terrible absurdity of this thing called the Nation'. For him, 'nation' was just another name for an organisation of politics and commerce, and warned that when it 'becomes all powerful at the cost of harmony of the higher social life, then it is an evil day for humanity'. Ideas of nationalism were rife in India and he lamented that 'this abstract being, the Nation, is ruling India' (Tagore 1917: 133, 58, 22, 24). He further declared at the height of the First World War that 'there is only one history' the history of man. All national histories are merely chapters in the larger one? (Quayes 2011). Tagore's ideas on nationalism, however, were not well received in Japan or the USA, where crowds had gathered expecting to listen to a sage-like poet from a mystical land. In his 1916 address at Tokyo Imperial University, notwithstanding his great admiration for its culture and history, Tagore warned Japan to check its rising nationalist tendencies and stay true to its spiritual values. Sections of the Japanese elite, in reaction to his pacifist ideas, were quick to offer a scathing critique of Tagore. Meanwhile, the poet gradually began to see nationalism itself as illegitimate. Responses to Tagore from different quarters of the world in this period are noteworthy.<sup>[6]</sup> In a 1917 letter, GRS Mead, a theosophist and close associate of Annie Besant, wrote to Tagore to say that he did not expect 'the poet of Gitanjali to turn political'. In his philosophy, Bhattacharya argues, 'Tagore was far ahead of his times and he ploughed a lonely furrow' (Tagore et al. 1997: 184; Bhattacharya 2013: 72).<sup>[7]</sup>

In 1918, in the light of US involvement in the war, Tagore became keen to go to the US again but his implication in the San-Francisco Hindu-German conspiracy case restricted his entry. Infuriated, Tagore wrote to President Wilson and others but, as the case dragged on, he abandoned his plans and remained in India. In the years that followed, owing to the poor translations of his poetry, the unpopularity of his American lectures attacking nationalism and a changing literary taste during the war, Tagore continued to be marginalised on the world stage. The poet who was received with great adulation during his popular years received such denunciations with 'barely concealed pain' (Tagore et al. 1997: 198-9, 149, xviii). The final curtain, however, came down in 1919 with the *Jalianwalabagh massacre* when General Dyer ordered his soldiers to open fire,

killing 379 and wounding 1200 unarmed civilians, and the British imposed martial law in Punjab.<sup>[8]</sup> Tagore, shocked by such colonial excesses, decided to renounce his knighthood. In a letter to the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, he wrote, 'the time has come when badges of honour make our shame glaring in the incongruous context of humiliation, and I for my part wish to stand, shorn of all special distinctions, by the side of those of my countrymen, who, for their so-called insignificance, are liable to suffer degradation not fit for human beings' (Tagore et al. 1997: 223). For the British, this renunciation was symbolic of his now firm anti-colonial stance. Yet, his enduring legacy is in that from his youth until even after the Amritsar tragedy Tagore never gave primacy to politics. Following the end of the war, Tagore would once again return to Europe. To his surprise, he was received with overwhelming warmth in war-torn Germany. He concluded that 'it must be that the nations of the West were looking for some new ideal from the East' (Guha 2012).

In 1921, eight years after he had been awarded the Nobel prize, Tagore gave the customary acceptance speech at the Swedish academy where he laid stress on global cooperation and harmony. In the aftermath of the war, as former dominions and colonies became nation states, their war contribution was either marginalised or reconfigured while Tagore himself suffered from 'his being made a parochial possession of Bengal' (Das 2013: 26, Guha 2012). In the study of global experiences of the Great War, Tagore's work is valuable not only for his political and social ideas but also as a link between the criticism of war poetry and the broader field of postcolonial studies (Featherstone 2013: 174). In comparing Tagore's popularity within the language group of Bengalis, Jack argues that there is no equivalent, barring perhaps the popularity of Robert Burns in Scotland, a hundred years before. While Tagore may still be seen as a 'purely local phenomenon?', Jack argues that Tagore's message was international (Jack 2011). Although the poet was famous in the West as a spiritualist, the essence of his writings lay in his critical reasoning and in his ideas of the universal man who was free (Sen 2011). In contrast to the western memory of Tagore, he was an artist, philosopher and writer, a well-travelled thinker with progressive ideas, an educationalist, ecologist and critical nationalist. His core ideas- of the need for self-determination and to strengthen the nation from below; the universal man and his commitment to education, first through Shantiniketan and then Viswa-Bharati University- transcended borders. During the war years, Tagore continued to accept invitations to give lectures at universities and public gatherings across the world. While he used these platforms to propagate internationalism and humanism, he directed his earnings towards educational reform initiatives. With Tagore's contributions running into thousands, his political critique during the war was far-reaching. Tagore, like most of his contemporaries of the early twentieth century, witnessed the rise of nationalism in both East and West. He lived through the First World War but he also went on to be a part of the popular struggle for Indian freedom, and he was unique in the ideas he stood for and extraordinary in his abilities to express them. Here, it is valuable to remember that Tagore described his own cultural background as 'a confluence of three cultures, Hindu, Mohammedan, and British?': a complete contrast to those who viewed the world then and the world today as a 'clash of civilisations' (Sen 2011).

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## NOTES:

[1] In a letter to W. W. Pearson, 25 October 1917 (Tagore et al. 1997: 185-6).

[2] Owen's admiration for Tagore, however, never translated into 'an engagement with his Indian comrades-in-arms' (Das 2013: 25).

[3] The poem '*The Sunset of the Century*' forms the last chapter of his 1917 book, '*Nationalism*' (Tagore 1917: 157).

[4] India's contributions to the war would later contribute to Montagu's 1917 declaration that promised a 'progressive realisation of responsible self-government' as the future aim

[5] In 1915, special legislation in India for Defense of India against sedition in the context of World War 1

[6] Even Gandhi famously commented of Tagore that 'the poet lives in a magnificent world of his own creation ' his world of ideas' (Ghosal 2016)

[7] Tagore was ahead of his times even in his understanding of women, their discontents and dilemmas, in patriarchal societies (Jack 2011).

[8] The Rowlatt Bill, passed despite opposition from the Indian members of Imperial Agitation from 30 March 1919, led to the declaration of martial law in Punjab on 10 April 1919.

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