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Tagore: The concept of ancient communitarianism

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Abstract

There exists an impressive volume of academic literature when it comes to the study of Rabindranath Tagore and his notion of politics. Owing to his explicit discourse on nation, nationalism and society, Tagore's idea of these notions have clearly been extensively and massively over-explored. However, when it comes to exploring Tagore's notion of communitarianism, scholars have repeatedly shied away from doing so— essentially because the myriad minded genius of Tagore never spoke explicitly on the notion. And yet, he is taken to be the greatest advocate of communitarianism at the backdrop of the Bengali renaissance— and this poses a serious conundrum. Communitarianism has emerged to play a pivotal role in the study of society today- and it is taken to go without saying that the concept of communitarianism is a very recent development in the realm of politics, owing its origin to the early 1990s, essentially in the Western world. The aim of this paper is to deconstruct this very stereotype by seeking to research and elucidate on the idea of communitarianism as perceived by Tagore.

'My heart sings to the joy of light and life around me, and it is only in the midst of all this that I have found a place for my individual self.'

-Rabindranath Tagore, Shantiniketan, April 1928

Introduction: The notion of communitarianism has a pivotal role to play in the study of society today. Communitarianism could be identified as a political philosophy stressing on the connection of the individual and community. Communitarian philosophy is based upon the belief that a person's social identity and personality are largely moulded by community relationships, thus placing a substantial emphasis on the community in studying politics and society. It is taken to go without saying that the concept of communitarianism is a very recent development in the realm of politics, owing its origin to the late 1980s and early 1990s, essentially in the Western world.

However, if it is taken that communitarianism engages itself primarily with man's concern with the good of the community and bridging the gap between the individual and the community, then communitarianism as an idea is quite old. It is found in classical socialist doctrines, for instance, in the writings about the early commune and workers' solidarity, and further back in the New Testament. Such a philosophical stand is also reflected in Robert Owen's utopian socialism and Peter Kropotkin's anarchism. The founders of scientific socialism like Marx and Engels and the architects of fascism such as Mussolini and Gentile also sacrifice the interest of the individual at the altar of the community, so much so that the latter two go to the extent of using such a philosophical stance to justify state absolutism. However, such individual and sporadic attempts became structured

only in the 20th century. It was popularised in the 1980s and 1990s by theorists and academic communitarians like A. McIntyre, Danniell Bell, Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel and Michael Walzer. The whole point of elucidating on the sources of communitarianism as an approach to study society and politics is to show how it has, like most other theories and approaches, fallen prey to an inevitable and shameful eurocentricism– and essentially represented as a gift of the West to the world. The aim of this paper is to deconstruct this very stereotype by seeking to research and elucidate on the idea of communitarianism as perceived by the myriad minded genius of Rabindranath Tagore.

In the light of studying the idea of communitarianism as perceived by Tagore, it is important that we understand that Tagore never developed an explicit and extensive theory of communitarianism as was done by Dorothy Day and Amithai Etzioni in the early 1990s. Tagore's conception of communitarianism, dating back to the late 19th and early 20th century, is inextricably woven in his political and social thought, and stems out of three main aspects of his philosophy – the emphasis on the *Atma* (the individual soul) and the *Paramatma* (the Supreme Soul), his conception of nationalism and an ideal societal organisation in the Indian scenario, and his critique of the individualistic institution of nation as it developed in the Western context. These are thus, the three main pillars of Tagore's implicit perception of the idea of communitarianism. In this paper, I seek to explore and elucidate each of these areas in an attempt to put together the notion of communitarianism as perceived by Tagore.

2. The *Atma* and the *Paramatma*: “He who is one, above all colours, and who with his manifold powers supplies the inherent needs of men of all colours, who is in the beginning and in the end of the world is divine, and may he unite us in a relationship of good will.”
(Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, 1930).

The idea of the *Atma* (the individual soul) and the *Paramatman* (the Supreme Soul) is a central idea for any attempt to synthesize Tagore's notion of communitarianism. This is best represented in Tagore's 1931 book – *The Religion of Man*. In a conversation with Albert Einstein in the afternoon of July 14, 1930, Tagore remarked “The infinite personality of Man comprehends the Universe. There cannot be anything that is subsumed by the human personality, and this proves that the truth of the Universe is human truth. I have taken a scientific fact to illustrate this – Matter is composed of protons and electrons, with gaps between them; but matter may seem to be solid. Similarly, humanity is composed of individuals, yet they have their connection of human relationship, which gives living solidarity to man's world. The entire universe is linked up with us in a similar manner, it is a human universe.”

In simpler words, Tagore, in trying to comprehend the entirety of the Universe, sees an eternal connection of all souls of the Universe with the Supreme Divine Soul. The *Brahma*, Tagore continues, being the individual soul, are but mere parts of the *Parabrahma*. In this manner, he sees all souls of the Universe to be interconnected to each other, and thus, the individual or the Atman alone has no significant role in the Universe “the display of individual power, the might of nations must be counted as subordinate and the Soul of Man must triumph...” The scope of the centrality of the individual in the composition of the society, thus, has no place in Tagore's socio-political thought. In the Hibbert Lectures of 1930, Tagore, in an attempt to elucidate on the perfect social composition emphasised that it should be an institution which would allow all men (*Brahma*) to transcend the bounds of individuality so as to find himself in a broader bound of humanity and pure state of consciousness of his undivided unity with the *Parabrahma*.

It is, however, important to understand that though the role of the individual in the conduct of the Universe stands negligible for Tagore, he does not completely ignore the individual as an entity – this is where Tagore's conception of *Atmashakti* comes in. The word could literally be translated into self-empowerment, and this plays a crucial role in shaping Tagore's socio-political thought. However, self-empowerment, according to Tagore, could be realised not by placing the individual at the centre of the societal structure. This would only lead to isolating the individual from what Tagore calls the *Parabrahman*. Tagore's comprehension of the Universe is a fragile balance between the individual and the community with a fine thread of demarcation between the two.

According to Pradip Datta in his article *Tagore: Democracy as Dilemma*, “Tagore was committed to the possibility of actualising a *samaj* or society based on symmetrical relationships between interconnected individuals. *Atmashakti* was directed towards building the capacity to be equal”. In other words, Tagore dreamt of a very structured societal fabric which would allow the individuals as interconnected entities to work together towards the goal of social upliftment and empowerment, while at the same time, transcend the narrow confines of the community itself and develop a sense of belongingness to the broader human society – in political terms this could well be termed as the global civil society. This brings me to Tagore's concept of *samaj* as he wanted it to be.

3. Nationalism and *Samaj* in the Indian Scenario: A bulk of Tagore's communitarianism emerges from Tagore's extensive discourse on nationalism and his attempt to weave a societal fabric that is best suited to the Indian scenario. The foundation of Tagore's concept of *Atmashakti* has its roots in Tagore's preference of the *samaj* over the modern concept of a nation*. Nationalism, for Tagore, demanded a structured generation of authority strong enough to fight an all India colonial power. This led Tagore to formulate such mechanisms in the fight for independence that would eventually classify him as a rural communitarian. Tagore was very close to Gandhi in this respect.

Tagore emphasised on the notion of self-reliance while advocating cooperative production, and communitarian self-empowerment projects. In the background of the growing Indian nationalism and the renaissance in Bengal, and in his quest of rural reconstruction, Tagore developed his extensive notion of the *samaj* and *samajtantra*. Aware of the challenge Indian nationalism has to face with regard to the modern institution of an all India colonial power, Tagore placed an utmost faith in what Tagore calls the *bhadramandali* or the civil society, and the strength of the community or the *samaj*. In his words, “for a still longer period, the society and the community have maintained their identity through all types of crisis...all is owing to the strength of our ancient community.” (*Nationalism*, Rabindranath Tagore, Macmillan, New York, 1917)

Tagore discovers, in his *samajtantra* or societalism a kind of community which is typical to the image of ancient India. Modern day communitarians like Sandel would term it as 'constitutive', different from community in the sense that it is not merely 'cooperative'. Tagore's communitarianism is rooted in his convictions against the modern individualistic nation state. He has great trust on the community, which, he feels, 'always whispered chants of good, piety and righteousness above the distracting message of individual happiness'. The community or the *samaj*, Tagore feels, can effectively substitute the nation as a device for social unification and solidarity.

*“I am not opposed to a particular nation, but the concept of nations in general.”
Rabindranath Tagore in the lecture titled *Nationalism in India*, Tokyo, Japan, September 1916.

To elucidate on Tagore's conception of *samaj*, he suggests a two tier centralised arrangement. In the first tier, he talks of making villages self-reliant, with their pathshalas, dharmagolas, and banking

institutions. Villages would be grouped into mandalis, and these would in turn function under a representative institution in each district or province. At the same time, farmers would be made to pool in their land and capital in combinations which would be extended to the service sector such as the *goalas* (milkmen). Recognising the need for a centralised authority without surrendering the affective bonds of the *samaj*, Tagore also paints the image of the *samajpati*, a representative social leader who would personalise authority in the *samaj*.

As I had noted earlier, Tagore's exhaustive attempt to paint a *samaj* which would be successful in substituting the institution of the nation state is essentially derived from the negativity that he associated with the concept of the nation. It is, for this very reason that I identify Tagore's critique of the modern nation as the third pillar of Tagore's notion of communitarianism.

4. Critique of the Nation State: Benedict Anderson defined nation as an “imagined community”. Most social scientists maintain that the notion of nation is “notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyze”. However, in spite of such complexity in defining the institution of nation in the literature of political studies, Tagore was explicitly and excessively clear about his idea of nation. In spite of being a poet and heavily resorting to similes and imageries in most of his text on nation and nationalism, Tagore is rather straight and amazingly vivid when it comes to question of the nation. A nation, Tagore emphasized, is 'a political and economic union of people' and 'is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organised for a mechanical purpose'. For Tagore, the institution of the nation is essentially modern and western. The 'mechanical purpose' of the nation state implies an instrumental rationality in its political form. This nation has a purpose – the purpose of self-determination and enforcement in the human civilization and fulfilment of its political and economic interests– and this is ensured by the institution of the State.

Tagore's nation is, thus, essentially a nation state. Tagore's conceptualization of nationalism is very similar to that of Earnest Gellner, who emphasizes on an ideology of nationalism which creates nations rather than pre-existing nations developing nationalism. Tagore further goes on to emphasize that when “this organisation of politics and commerce, whose other name is the Nation, becomes all powerful at the cost of the higher social life, then it is an evil day for humanity”. Tagore contrasts the dehumanised and mechanical Western civilisation and the nation that developed out of it to the indigenous societal groups in India. His is a clarion call to the East, a warning, to not be mesmerized by the lure of this glittering institution of the Nation. He calls upon the world “not merely the subject races, but you who live under the delusion that you are free, are everyday sacrificing your freedom and humanity to this fetish of nationalism, living in the dense poisonous atmosphere of world wide suspicion and greed and panic...”

Partha Chatterjee in his article *Rabindrik Nation Ki*, which can be translated as ‘What is Tagore’s nation?’ points out that Tagore had predicted the impermanence of nations and the emergence of a union of nations and that, as creations of history nations would come and go. From his writings and utterances on nationalism we see an antinational Tagore, one who disengages himself from power structures and power struggles and one whose distaste for the ‘nation’ arises from the belief that it would crush individual freedom. Tagore rejects the political notion of commercial and aggressive nationalism followed by militarily stronger societies of the West in its entirety. He rather looks forward to a neo-national universal world order where societies would not be divided up or ranked in an order of hierarchy by such nationalism that brought into life Thucydides’ ancient maxim of “large nations do what they wish, while small nations accept what they must”. In his article

“Imagining One World: Rabindranath Tagore's Critique of Nationalism”, Mohamed A. Quayum stated-

“India’s myriad minded poet, Rabindranath Tagore—whom Bertrand Russell considered “worthy of the highest honour”, and Ezra Pound deemed “greater than any of us” as a poet—shared not an iota of positive sentiment towards the ideology. His foremost objection came from its very nature and purpose as an institution. The very fact that it is a social institution, a mechanical organisation, modelled on certain utilitarian objectives in mind, made it unpalatable to Tagore, who was a champion of creation over construction, imagination over reason and the natural over the artificial and the manmade: “Construction is for a purpose, it expresses our wants; but creation is for itself, it expresses our very beings” (“Construction versus Creation,” Soares 59).”

The political institution of the nation could be distinguished from the society or samaj in the sense that Tagore identifies society to be a 'spontaneous self-expression of man as a social being' – it does not have any ulterior material goal, and is an end in itself. Society is merely a web of natural human relationships, so that 'men can develop ideals of life in cooperation to one another'. Tagore's samaj indeed has a political side, with the concept of the samajpati, but he reserves this only for the specific purpose of self-preservation.

4. Conclusion: Tagore's perception of communitarianism not only stems out of his books, discourses and lectures, but is also explicitly expressed in his actions during his stay at Seleidaha and later, at Vishwa Bharati. During his stay at Seleidaha, Tagore often sought to transcend his status as zamindar by engaging in welfare activities. In an attempt to relate with his tenants, he would often stand and talk to them during his morning walks. There were even more spectacular acts that announced his commitment to social equality. His dedication towards rural reconstruction through cooperative endeavours during his stay at Viswa Bharati is also worth mentioning in this regard.

It is important to understand that due to the absence of an extensive theory on communitarianism by Tagore, his perception of communitarianism has to be understood with regard to the utmost emphasis Tagore placed on the institution of the society, while negating the modern institution of the nation state. It has to be understood that Tagore's communitarianism flows from a state of his thought where he quiet naturally sees all men to be interconnected to each other and equal. The idea of prioritising the samaj or the community was so natural, rooted and inextricably woven in Tagore's thought that he never thought of developing it into an extensive and separate theory of communitarianism.

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