

# TAGORE'S UNDERSTANDING OF CIVILIZATION

Dharma for man is the best expression of what he is in truth  
Tagore

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyze the ideas of Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) on civilization. The codes of civilization and future of mankind have been discussed by many Western scholars in the early 20th century. Most of them accept the West as a dominant and supreme civilization. Tagore was one of the significant Eastern scholars who thought on civilizational issues deeply. He critiques the dominant hegemony of Western world and proposes a harmony of both sides. He specifically paid attention to education. Moreover, he claimed that the idea of nationalism is a danger for the humanity. Instead, he proposed the idea of internationalism as an indispensable destination for humankind. This paper analyzes how Tagore approached the Western civilization in particular; in general, it explores what a civilization looks like for Tagore. Tagore's understanding of "dharma" (civilization), "education", "universal religion" and "international humanism" is considered as the subjects of discussion on civilizations. My method is a discourse analysis of his writings and an inquiry from secondary books; articles and scholarly works that have been written on his thought.

**Keywords:** Civilization, Rabindranath Tagore, West, East, India, Education, Nationalism, Internationalism, Humanism, Universal Religion

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A century ago, when the multicultural term did not exist as a concept or practice Kipling (1865-1936), an English journalist, poet, and novelist, claimed in one of his poems that “East is east and West is west and never the twain shall meet”. To him, this phrase expresses that both blocks have a separate destiny. On the other hand, the rises of nationalism and First World War have necessarily shown the importance of the alliance of civilizations for mankind.

A poet, writer and humanitarian, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1940), was the first Indian who won a Nobel Prize for Literature and who had played a key role in the renaissance of modern India, had spent a lot of time to understand the relation between Eastern and Western civilizations. As an eastern scholar, he proposed many ideas and projects in order to have better future for a human being. In this paper, I shall analyze his understanding of “dharma”, “education” and his proposal of “universal religion” and “international humanism”.

## I. EASTERN AND WESTERN CIVILIZATIONS

On the discussion of Eastern and Western civilizations, Tagore points out:

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 ride progressed and that progress was civilization. If we ever ventured to ask, “Progress towards what, and Progress for whom?”<sup>1</sup>

Tagore starts with an essential question. He critically approaches the concept of “progress” and “civilization”. To him, this sort of understanding of civilization is proposed by the imperial Europe. It does not represent an Eastern understanding of civilization. Therefore, in this paper, the word of “civilization”, as Tagore criticizes, is used to refer to the Western lifestyle.

According to Tagore, in the West, particularly in Europe, the state has a central role in the society, it is the source of all strength. Nationalism (in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) has risen up in West as an ideology. In general, nationalism was used as a discourse of civilization. Hence,

1 Rabindranath Tagore. *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: A Miscellany* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1994), 714.

Tagore elaborates the civilization as a “nation” in his writings. He furthermore argues that every nation has its own distinctive national heritage. For instance, in India, social life has always appointed the destiny of political rule and rulers. The structure of society was that all different races and kings lived together throughout centuries. Therefore, political structure in India functioned smoothly by allotting different assignments according to capabilities.<sup>2</sup>

As consequence of this sort of differences Tagore says:

We must forever give up the habit of swearing by Europe, European history and European society is not ours. We shall have to understand clearly what ideal has long been admired and cherished by our countrymen and what means should be adopted to inspire the heart of our people.<sup>3</sup>

Tagore states that India has adopted the history as a cycle between the past and the future through Upanishads, ancient poetry, social rituals and religion. Therefore, one cannot take the European historiography as his theoretical premise for India.<sup>4</sup> Also India unlike Europe is composed of many countries (nations) packed in one geographical receptacle.<sup>5</sup> Hence, we see that Gupta agrees with Tagore that Europe has a politically strong state; instead, India has well-balanced social organizations.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, both sides have different concentrations in terms of controlling the society. According to Gupta, Tagore intentionally emphasizes the harmony of Indian and Western traditions in order to solve Indian’s material and Western’s spiritual missing parts.<sup>7</sup> Thus, both sides would fulfill each other’s missing characters.

2 Kalyan Sen Gupta. *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (New York: Ashgate, 2005), 39.

3 David A. Gall. “Before and After Postmodernism: Rabindranath Tagore and Art Education in Santiniketan”, Ph. D. Thesis, The Pennsylvania State University, 1996, 39. For more information also see Himangshu Bhushan Mukherjee, *Education for Fullness: A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1962).

4 Debmalya Das. “Challenging Enlightenment Paradigms: Responses of Benjamin and Tagore”, *The Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities, Special Issue on Rabindranath Tagore, 150 Years*, 2, 4 (2010), 655.

5 David A. Gall. “Before and After Postmodernism: Rabindranath Tagore and Art Education in Santiniketan”, Ph.D. Thesis, The Pennsylvania State University, 1996), 10.

6 Gupta, op. cit., 40.

7 Ibid, 39.

## II. DHARMA OR CIVILIZATION

As it is mentioned above, Tagore is not content to use the western concept of civilization. He draws an original term from Indian culture and philosophical tradition. He thus declares:

The Sanskrit word “dharma” is the nearest synonym in our own language that occurs to me for the word “civilization”. In fact, we have no other word except perhaps some newly-coined one, lifeless and devoid of atmosphere. The specific meaning of *dharma* is that principle which holds us firm together and leads us to our best welfare. The general meaning is the essential quality of a thing.<sup>8</sup>

Tagore very much emphasizes on the ancient tradition of Hindu heritage. The concept of “dharma” for him is a kind of development of human achievement in the life. Dharma is best to level of society as well. By talking about this level, he does not necessarily refer to India. He means any society has right to achieve this level without colonizing others. It must come from the inside of the society, so that it may lead people to human perfections. One of the Tagorian scholars Mukherjee comments on Tagore’s understanding of human perfection as, “the man is complex and always transcends himself. The idea of human perfection cannot be stuck into an inflexible idea. This makes possible for various races to have different approaches for this term.”<sup>9</sup>

Tagore thinks that the concept civilization is a European property. It exclusively simplifies its meaning. To him, civilization cannot be restricted to the formula into which European or any culture has cast it. But he also left the door open for the possibility of some formulations of the striving for human perfection.<sup>10</sup> Tagore, as a litterateur, describes the larger meaning of dharma as follows:

Dharma for man is the best expression of what he is in truth. He may reject dharma and may choose to be an animal or a machine and thereby may not injure himself, may even gain strength and wealth from an external and material point of view, yet this will be worse than death for him as a man.<sup>11</sup>

8 U. S. Rukhaiyar. *Studies in Indian English Fiction and Poetry* (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2003), 189.

9 Mukherjee, op. cit., 43.

10 Gall, op. cit., 34.

11 Rabindranath Tagore and Mohit Kumar Ray. *Essays* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Dist., 2007), 719.

The origin of this philosophy, which is justified by Tagore, comes from the Upanishadic tradition of Indian thought. Dharma is central thought in the philosophy of Tagore. Through dharma, he aimed to recover an education system and ethics in his schooling modernization project. Gall states that this core of dharma, which is the ideal of reverence for God and humanity, was something that Europe had deviated from in its imperious march over the globe.<sup>12</sup> The problem was not simply economic and political, it was moral and spiritual at its core; today we may prefer to say it was/is profoundly cultural.

## III. EDUCATION AS A CONSTRUCTION OF THE CIVILIZATION

Tagore approaches education as a way of building a unique civilization. Therefore, he pays very much attention to specifically Indian educational system. He argues that western type of education cannot fulfill Indian’s need in the contemporary world. He noted:

It is necessary to remember that if we place education in the hands of the [British] Government, they will attempt through that education to fulfill their own interests and not ours. They will so arrange that a farmer may remain only a farmer in his village; they will not bother to make him a true citizen of India. We can imply education according to our desire only if we take education in our own hands.<sup>13</sup>

Tagore states that if India does not have her own way of education the Western concept and thought will be dominant in the Indian culture. He, of course, appreciates the educational development in the West. He thinks that Indians should learn civilizational tools from the West.<sup>14</sup> But also Indians should have their own education system. Tagore also was worried about the dehumanization of technological development. He stated that, the extreme idealization of rationality and technology would harm the human salvation. As a precaution, he tries to find out how to humanize the sciences.<sup>15</sup>

He established a school based on his philosophy of education in 1901 when he was

12 Mukherjee, 42.

13 Quoted in Gall, 40.

14 Gupta, *Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, 44.

15 Debmalaya Das, op. cit., 656.

patriotic in his early age. In 1918, this school has been converted to a university by him. The university he established called Visva-Bharati University (Universal Indian University) started to function in the year when First World War ended. He intentionally wanted to draw the attention of the western countries on the paradigm shifting of the nationalism into a form of fascism.

According to another Tagorian scholar, David Gall, Tagore purpose was to offer Indian perspective in particular and Asian values in general as solution for world issues. He thus states:

Through Visva-Bharati, Tagore hoped Asian culture could offer its wisdom, the best of itself, to humanity in the hope of averting global and local conflicts, that reared their heads because modern humanity, although technologically more sophisticated than his ancestors, nevertheless was so intolerant and unappreciative of difference, that strife was more the norm than amity.<sup>16</sup>

Tagore's effort to reform the society and promote world peace through education is very remarkable indeed when we consider the condition in the early years of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today we see many international and transnational studies trying to deal with many issues surrounding world peace.

#### IV. NATIONALISM AS A DECONSTRUCTION OF THE CIVILIZATION

The time of First World War India was intensively active in terms of social mobility. British rule was very strict despite the rise of many independent movements. In 1905, Swadeshi movement has gained power in Bengal as a response to the British policy. Tagore initially started giving lectures and writing patriotic songs for the movement. But, very soon, Tagore realized that the movement turning violent with the nationalist arguments against innocent civilians who were not Hindus, especially the Muslims. He was further disheartened to see that many of the impassioned youths turned to the cult of the bomb, hoping to liberate their

<sup>16</sup> Gall, 9-10.

motherland from the yoke of foreign tyranny by violence and terror. Thus, Tagore left the movement when he heard that some British innocent civilians were killed by a young Bengali radical.

Tagore stepped back towards all nationalist movements. He even did not support Gandhi's nationalist movement against the British rule. Unlike Gandhi, Tagore claimed that political struggle for freedom as an outcome of nationalist identity which we derived by the British out was not the right solution for India's problems. He stated with the hope that he is not thrusting off Western civilization and segregating independence. There should be a deep association between both sides.<sup>17</sup>

According to Tagore, India does not need a "blind revolution"<sup>18</sup> Instead, he argued, in *Nationalism in India*, what she needs is a constructive work coming from within herself.<sup>19</sup> He believed that India should have similar experience where the Europe had it in the past which is renaissance that broke up "the feudal system and the tyrannical conventionalism of the Latin Church."<sup>20</sup>

Tagore describes nationalism as a production of the post-religious laboratory of industrial capitalism in Europe. It was only an "organization of politics and commerce".<sup>21</sup> This kind of nationalism spreads selfishness, power and prosperity to set up material moral man or so-called the complete man.<sup>22</sup> He argued that nationalism cannot be self-expression of a man as a social being. Naturally, man is able to co-operate with one another. Otherwise, a political and commercial union of a group of people, in which they congregate to maximize their profit, progress and power; it is "the organized self-interest of a people, where it is least human and least spiritual".<sup>23</sup> Tagore deemed nationalism as a recurrent threat to humanity, because with its propensity for the material and the rational, it trampled over the human spirit and human emotion; it upset man's moral balance, "obscuring his human side under the shadow of soul-less organization".<sup>24</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Anthony Xavier Soares. *Lectures and Addresses by Rabindranath Tagore: Selected from the Speeches of the Poet* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 106.

<sup>18</sup> Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson. *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 240.

<sup>19</sup> Soares, op. cit., 108.

<sup>20</sup> Mohammad A. Quayum. "Imagining 'One World': Rabindranath Tagore's Critique of Nationalism", *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 7 (2006), 6.

<sup>21</sup> Rabindranath Tagore. *Nationalism* (London: Macmillan, 1917), 7.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Quayum, "Imagining 'One World', 4.

Moreover, Tagore claims that nationalism has been used as justification of colonialism by the British. They were never sincere in developing colonized countries/nations for independence. All was about their interest by promoting nationalism.<sup>25</sup> Tagore continues that, they thrived by victimizing and violating other nations, and never felt deterred in their heinous actions by the principles of love, sympathy or universal fellowship. He said that “because this civilization is the civilization of power, therefore it is exclusive; it is naturally unwilling to open its sources of power to those whom it has selected for its purposes for exploitation”.<sup>26</sup>

By its very nature as an organization, Tagore argued, nationalism could ill afford any altruism in this regard.<sup>27</sup> By claiming Indian nationalism, it would compromise India's history and identity as a culture and bring it under the shadow of the West. He warned: “We, in India, must make up our minds that we cannot borrow other people's history and that if we stifle our own we are committing suicide. When you borrow things that do not belong to your life, they only serve to crush your life.”<sup>28</sup> Tagore believes that India does not need Western civilization to cover up herself. Whatever would be built in India, it must be coming from inside not outside. Otherwise violent would be unavoidable after some time.

As it is clear above, he sees nationalism as a source of war, destruction rather than international solidarity that includes a larger and more expansive vision of the world. Another Tagorian scholar, Pramanik, points out:

The modern nation seems to be merely an organization of politics and commercialization armed with power and wealth. It promotes only the material wellbeing of the people, but not their moral and spiritual health where the soul rests. So, it is important to restore the soul to its rightful place. This requires a humanitarian intervention into present self-seeking and belligerent nationalism.<sup>29</sup>

According to Tagore, there was no Indian nationalism until British arrived India. One could say there were nations in the continent. Many various societies shared a similar culture

25 Tagore, *Nationalism*, 10.

26 Ibid, 13.

27 Quayum, 4.

28 Tagore and Kumar Ray, *Essays*, 496.

29 Ramchandra Pramanik. “Rabindranath Tagore: An Advocate of Humanism”, *International Journal of Innovative Research & Development*, 2: 8 (2013), 391.

and lived together for over the centuries. The idea of nationalism is an outcome of British rule in India, which was beneficial for the industry in the UK.<sup>30</sup>

Tagore thus declares:

India has never had a real sense of nationalism. Even though from childhood I had been taught that idolatry of the nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my firm conviction that my countrymen will truly gain their India by fighting against the education that teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity.<sup>31</sup>

Tagore gives an example of Japanese civilization as unique and original. Japan has taken some good parts from the West and also it pursues its own path, evolves its own civilization and tradition. Japanese civilization is not political but social and based upon humanity. Same thing should be for Indian nations too. He said that we must bring the spirit of our civilization into harmony with the history of all nations of the earth.<sup>32</sup> He thought that India with its heterogeneous mixture of races and ethnicities would suffer grievously from the nationalism of the kind that Europe was dispensing. In his novel, *Gora*, Tagore explored the problems involved in the nationalist project and he thus describes the predicament of our modern age with vivid life situations in his novel.<sup>33</sup>

## V. INTERNATIONALISM AS A SOLUTION FOR PERFECT CIVILIZATION

At some point, Tagore was a patriotic thinker. But his understanding of patriotism was different from the others. He describes it as conscience, inclusive and love for humanity. He had a strong belief in the dialog between civilizations.<sup>34</sup> He dreamed of a morally and politically enlightened community of nations through the espousal of a centrifugal outlook, multilateral imagination, principle of universality and reciprocal recognitions. He states that

30 Gall, 50.

31 Tagore, *Nationalism*, 127.

32 Ibid, 14.

33 Gall, “Before and After Postmodernism”, 52.

34 Pramanik, “Rabindranath Tagore: An Advocate of Humanism”, op. cit., 391.

instead of limited nationalism there must be internationalism and universal humanism. All human being interrelated to each other. A person is not only belonging to his/her country where he/she was born. He/she lives in the world of humanity as well. Tagore claims that the problems occurred in the society are mutual. No one can skip it. Either all shall be saved together or drawn together into destruction.

Tagore points that internationalism should be the spirit of the modern age, every nation should encounter with it. While he was in Santiniketan he gave lectures about the bad face of First World War. He emphasized that man must learn lessons from the history.<sup>35</sup> Tagore grounds his philosophy of internationalism on the cooperation in the area of knowledge and culture to construct a better world for human being. According to a Tagorian thinker, Bhattacharya, Tagore's derived values are as follows:

- The fundamental unity of man and that knowledge has no boundaries and is a collective endeavor of all men of all time and all lands.
- True self-expression and self-realization come from the ability to merge one's individuality into the many and break out of egotistical isolation and selfish interests.
- War is not a solution for international problems.
- The importance of the cultivation of the power of reasoning and clear thinking to achieve peace, harmony, and progress.<sup>36</sup>

For him, the idea of internationalism does not necessarily force anyone to be a socialist or capitalist. It just guarantees one of a spiritual kind based on the harmony of different races and religions.<sup>37</sup> He basically proposed this idea of internationalism as an inter-civilizational alliance which is a combination of the East and West. He said that he believes in the true meeting of the East and the West.<sup>38</sup> In a letter to Foss Westcott, Tagore further wrote, "Believe me, nothing would give me greater happiness than to see the people of the West and the East march in a common crusade against all that robs the human spirit of its significance".<sup>39</sup>

35 Kumkum Bhattacharya. *Rabindranath Tagore: Adventure of Ideas and Innovative Practices in Education* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer Science & Business Media, 2013), 71-72.

36 Ibid.

37 Sen Gupta, *Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, 50.

38 Dutta and Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*, op. cit., 197.

39 Ibid.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

First of all in concluding I would like to remark that Tagore eagerly emphasized on the idea of an alliance of East and West. Although he was a nationalist poet at his early age, he shifted his position to a universal character that he titled as internationalism. In all his efforts he tried to develop theoretical and practical background of this idea. In order to realize his goal he attempted to establish a school in Santiniketan. Later on, this small school was changed into a university. He has invited many people from various places in India and the world to interact with them.

In the second place the phenomenon of civilization remained a central concern for his project of humanism. He understands civilization as the meaning of perfect man. This perfectness cannot be belonging to a particular region. Therefore, he strictly opposes western understanding of civilization. He claims that the Indian concept of "dharma" could be used instead of civilization for eastern societies, particularly for India. The roots of this concept is imbedded within the *Upanishads*. However, it needs more elaboration and more works needed to be done on it.

He claims that civilization in European hands is used as a tool of commerce and politics. He explicitly opposed this sort of understanding of civilization. In order to have the best expression of civilization, the education system must be organized very well. Especially Indians as he suggests should not take the western type of education. Because the essence of western education is not suitable for Indian traditional thought.

Furthermore, Tagore also provides solutions for some serious issues in the Indian society such the caste system. The caste system has become too rigid and has taken a hypnotic hold on the mind of the people; what was once meant to introduce social order by accommodating the various racial groups in India, has now become a gigantic system of cold-blooded repression.<sup>40</sup>

His hope was that if India could establish a bridge between the various ethnics and religious groups via social co-operation and mutual spirit, she could hold herself as a model of unity for rest of the world.<sup>41</sup> Tagore claims this dream can only come true through proper education of the people. The mind of people must be free for the eradication of poverty and cultivation of freedom.

Tagore believes in inter-civilizational co-existence. His vision was driven to a symbiosis

40 Quayum, "Imagining ...", op. cit., 6.

41 Ibid, 7.

of the East and the West.<sup>42</sup> He believed to both Eastern and Western should unit for the future of human being, for solution human crises. He is obviously depressed because of violence and wars among the nations. Therefore, I think, his emphasizes on the world peace and dialog is a consequence of conditions of his time.

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42 Pramanik, "Rabindranath Tagore: An Advocate of Humanism", 394.