

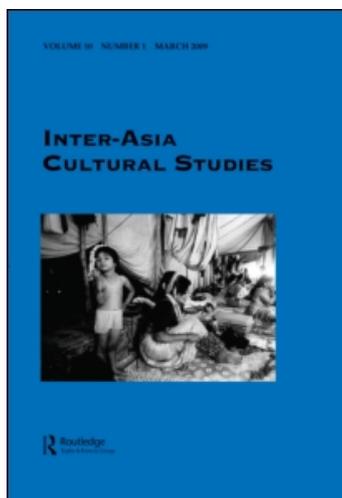
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## Tagore, China and the critique of nationalism

Partha CHATTERJEE

Rabindranath Tagore (1860–1941), poet, novelist, dramatist, essayist, composer and painter, was a towering figure in modern India's intellectual and cultural life. His was perhaps the single most influential contribution to the modern national literary and artistic culture of Bengal. Following the award of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913, Tagore was, for some time, a noted presence in literary circles in Europe and the United States. His influence on the cultural life of Bengal and India has been far more enduring. For instance, the national anthems of India and Bangladesh, two of the most populous countries of the world, are both adapted from songs written and composed by Tagore.

Despite his own massive contribution to the construction of the modern national culture of his country, Rabindranath was a consistent critic of nationalism.<sup>1</sup> In his earliest writings on the subject, he drew a sharp distinction between the conditions that produced nationalism in Europe and the absence of those conditions in India. India, he argued, was not, and did not need to become, a nation. The principal reason was that unlike Europe where there was homogeneity of race, culture and sentiment, Indian society was heterogeneous. The immense diversity made the mechanical arrangement of national political unity unsuitable for India. During the First World War, when he wrote his lectures on *Nationalism* delivered in the United States and Japan, Tagore said repeatedly that the European nation represented a 'homogeneous race' (Tagore 1996[1917]a: 463). On the other hand, the greatest difficulty encountered by India was its 'race problem': its society had made a place for many different 'races', and

now the challenge was to respect the distinctness of each and find a way to maintain unity. 'Races ethnologically different have in this country come into close contact. This fact has been and still continues to be the most important one in our history' (Tagore 1996[1917]b: 419). India, he said, had tried 'to make an adjustment of races, to acknowledge the real differences between them where these exist, and yet seek for some basis of unity' (Tagore 1996[1917]a: 453). In these lectures delivered in 1917, Tagore expressed not even the slightest doubt that India's path to salvation did not lie in trying to become a nation. 'India has never had a real sense of nationalism. ... it is my conviction that my countrymen will truly gain their India by fighting against the education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity' (Tagore 1996[1917]a: 456).

Tagore's arguments did find many sympathetic ears in Europe and America, weary from the bloodshed and suffering of the First World War. But somewhat unexpectedly, they came up against vocal opposition during his visit to China in 1924. The debates that took place during that visit are instructive not merely as a forgotten chapter in the history of intellectual relations between China and India but because of their striking relevance to some of our debates today. I wish to explore these issues in this article.

### Tagore's China visit

Tagore arrived in Shanghai on 12 April 1924. His writings were at this time fairly well known in Chinese literary circles through English translations and some

Chinese translations from the English. Tagore's lectures in Beijing were organized by the Lecture Association (Chiang-hsüeh she) and introduced by Liang Qichao (1873–1929), the famous writer, historian and political figure. Among Tagore's closest associates during the visit were two prominent modern writers, Hu Shi (1891–1962) and Xu Zhimo (1897–1931). Apparently, Tagore's poetry had been particularly noticed by modern Chinese writers for the use of the 'free verse' form in Tagore's own English translations in *Gitanjali* and for his short poems written in the Japanese *haiku* style. Among others who had enthusiastically joined in inviting Tagore to China were the idealist philosophers Zhang Junmai (Carsun Chang) (1886–1969) and Liang Shu-ming. Zhang had just created a controversy by attacking the claim of modern science to exclusive access to truth and by celebrating the powers of idealist philosophy. Liang Shu-ming was an admirer of the rural way of life and was keen to prevent its destruction in the face of advancing urbanization.

However, this group of Tagore's admirers in the Beijing Lecture Association had its own critics. The Chinese intellectual world was at this time becoming sharply polarized around the question of its traditional Confucian culture. A new group of modernists was clamouring for a radical break with the old culture. For them, the circle that surrounded Tagore during his visit was still too attached to the traditional conventions and spiritual metaphysics of the past. By association, Tagore's plea for a renewed evaluation of the spiritual culture of the East as an antidote to the greedy materialism of the West seemed to them to be contaminated by the same anti-modern attitude. Led by Guo Moruo (1892–1978), Mao Dun (Shen Dehong) (1896–1981) and Wen Yiduo (1899–1946), and quietly supported by Lu Xun (1881–1936), these critics were, as Tagore would later remark, 'determined to misunderstand' him.<sup>2</sup>

In his very first talk after his arrival in Shanghai, Tagore confessed to a feeling of nervousness: 'What is it these people expect when they invite me to their country?' He

declared that he had come as a poet. 'I say that a poet's mission is to attract the voice which is yet inaudible in the air; to inspire faith in the dream which is unfulfilled; to bring the earliest tidings of the unborn flower to a sceptic world' (Tagore 1996[1924]a: 641). Speaking to a group of students at Hangzhou, he recalled the Buddhist monks who had come from India to China many centuries ago. 'The man from India who lived and died here, ... came not with a sense of race superiority, or with a sense of the superiority of his religion, but through an exuberance of love which drove him from his own land'. Such communications had now become difficult among peoples. 'Science has made it easy for nations to come closer, but the same science has made it easy for us to kill, to exploit; not to know each other, and yet to believe that we know'. He then announced his mission. 'I have come to ask you to re-open the channel of communion which I hope is still there ... I shall consider myself fortunate if, through this visit, China comes nearer to India and India to China – for no political or commercial purpose, but for disinterested human love and for nothing else' (Tagore 1996[1924]b: 643–644).

In preparation for his visit, the fiction monthly *Hsiao-shuo yüeh-pao* had published two special Tagore numbers. But most of the discussion in China was based on the very limited body of his English writings and translations; no one had any idea of the immense variety and richness of his poetry and prose writings in Bengali. Nevertheless, his critics seized on the dangers of harping on the theme of Eastern tradition and its supposed preference for peace and harmony. In an article published on the day of Tagore's arrival in Shanghai, Mao Dun declared: 'We are determined not to welcome the Tagore who loudly sings the praises of Eastern civilization, nor do we welcome the Tagore who creates a paradise of poetry and love, and leads our youth into it so that they may find comfort and intoxication in meditating ... Oppressed as we are by the militarists from within the country and the imperialists from without, this is no

time for dreaming' (cited in Hay 1970: 200–201). Guo Moruo was sharper in his attack, calling Tagore's call for peace 'morphine and coconut wine': 'The preaching of peace is the greatest poison in today's world. Peace propaganda is the magic charm that protects the propertied class; it is the ball and chain that fetters the propertyless class' (cited in Hay 1970: 203). Wen Yiduo saw a literary danger: 'Today our new poetry is already sufficiently empty, weak, overintellectual, and formless. If we add to these things Tagore's influence, we will only increase the disease...' (cited in Hay 1970: 197). Lu Xun refrained from making any public statements, but later remarked that his Chinese hosts appeared to present Tagore as 'a living god' and were keen to immerse themselves in the perfume of his presence in order to enhance their own literary and personal standing (Das and Tan 1985: 60).

In his introduction to Rabindranath's public lectures in Beijing, however, Liang Qichao returned exactly to that theme. After making a learned survey of Indian influences on religion, philosophy, music, architecture, painting, sculpture, drama and literature in ancient China, Liang welcomed Tagore by saying: '...we hope that the influence he is going to exert on China will not in any way be inferior to that of Kumarajiva and Chang Ti' (Liang 1996). Tagore, perhaps alerted to the sources of hostility that had been aroused by his visit, decided to make an uncharacteristic excursion into his personal antecedents as a writer in order to explain why it was somewhat ridiculous to call him a traditionalist when in fact he had been accused all his life in India of being too much of an unconventional modernist. He spoke of the social isolation faced by his family for holding unorthodox religious views that were critical of traditional Hindu beliefs and practices. He spoke of his own experiments in breaking the Bengali literary conventions of his time, not only by learning from modern Europe but by going back, even as a boy, to the poetry of the medieval Vaishnava poets and Bhakti-Sufi saints. 'I must admit that the

greater part of these lyrics was erotic and not quite suited to a boy about to reach his teens. But my imagination was fully occupied by the beauty of their forms and the music of their words...' However, his literary experiments had not been universally accepted in his own country and even now, when his reputation had spread far and wide, he still had hostile critics. Only his songs, he thought, had 'found their place in the heart of my land'. People, in their joys and sorrows, would always sing them. This, he added, was 'the work of a revolutionist'. He then issued what was virtually a challenge to his critics: 'The impertinence of material things is extremely old. The revelation of spirit in man is truly modern: I am on its side, for I am modern. ... If you want to reject me, you are free to do so. But I have my right as a revolutionary to carry the flag of freedom of spirit into the shrine of your idols – material power and accumulation'. The pursuit of material power necessarily involves the creation of a machine-like social organization. 'When an organization which is a machine, becomes a central force, political, commercial, educational or religious, it obstructs the free flow of inner life of the people...' (Tagore 1996a). The revolution must proclaim the refusal of the human spirit to accept the dictates of a mechanical organization.

### Community, not the State

This was a theme that Tagore emphasized in almost all of his writings on politics and society. He was convinced that Indian civilization had always marked out a very limited role for the state and instead placed primary emphasis on the community or *samāj*. Before the English arrived in India, the *samāj* would carry out through its own initiative all necessary beneficial works to meet the needs of the people. It did not look to the State to perform those functions. The kings would go to war, or go on hunts, and some would even abandon all princely duties and spend their time in pleasure and entertainment. But the *samāj* did not necessarily suffer for this. The duties of the *samāj*

were allocated by the *samāj* itself among different persons. The arrangement by which this was done was called *dharma*.

European civilization seeks to create unity by keeping differences at bay, or by destroying difference and bringing about homogeneity. On the other hand, Indian civilization, according to Tagore, does not deny differences, but, by recognizing them and demarcating the relation of each group with all the others, tries to find a place for all in society. 'That the bringing together of the diverse into one, of making the stranger into one's own, is not the same as turning everything into a homogeneous mass – do we, in this country, have to shout this truth from the rooftops?' (Tagore 1960a: 706) He had no doubt that India's ideal was 'neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship' (Tagore 1996[1917]b: 419), but social unity through recognition of the mutual differences of races and communities.

### One's own country

For Tagore, therefore, what was important was not the nation, but *samāj* or community; not the political unity of the state, but the social harmony of the community. It is in this context that he interpreted the meaning of the term *svadeś* (literally, one's own country) that recurs frequently in his writings. That I have my *deś* or country is a palpable truth. But do I have my country because I have been born in a particular geographical territory? Or do I have my country because I have been raised in a particular geographical-cultural environment? No, those are not the reasons.

The certain knowledge that I have a country comes out of a quest. Those who think that the country is theirs simply because they have been born in it are creatures besotted by the external things of the world. But, since the true character of the human being lies in his or her inner nature imbued with the force of self-making, only that country can be one's *svadeś* that is created by one's own knowledge, intelligence, love and effort. (Tagore 1960b: 293)

The key to Tagore's thinking on the nation is hidden in this statement. My *svadeś* is not something that has merely occupied a patch of territory on the surface of the earth from time immemorial. It does not consist only of its geography or natural resources. It does not even comprise the collection of groups, communities or peoples that have, through the ages, settled on its land. In other words, my country is not simply an inheritance I have acquired by birth. My country is something that I, along with others, create by virtue of our knowledge, intelligence, love and effort. My country is the product of our imagination, the object of our quest – it is something we must earn.

Hence, Tagore insisted that instead of looking for the nation, we must revive and reconstruct our own community by establishing the collective power of self-making. The relation of every inhabitant of the country with the *svadeś* must be personal and quotidian. But such close personal relations of everyday community life are possible only in a small village. How can such relations develop across an entire country?

We can only make a small village directly our own and assume the full burden of all its responsibilities. But as we widen the perimeter, we feel the need for machinery. We can never visualize the country on the same scale as the village. Which is why one cannot serve the country in an unmediated way; one must seek the help of a machine. We have never possessed this machinery, because of which we must now import it from abroad. The machine will not run unless we set up the full range of instruments and procedures that go with it. (Tagore 1960a: 693)

By machinery, Rabindranath meant the organization of the modern state – political associations, representative bodies, campaigns for membership, elections, etc. In his writings during 1905–1908, he did not deny that these organizational forms were needed even for the construction of the *svadeśī* community. 'Yet, fully accepting that requirement, we must also say that India

cannot run by machinery alone: unless we can directly experience the individual feelings of our hearts, our true selves will not be drawn to such a thing. You may call this good or bad; you may curse it or praise it; but that is the truth' (Tagore 1960a: 693).

With the passage of time, however, this conviction regarding the necessity of establishing the machinery of political organization became clouded by doubt. Tagore came to see this failure as the inevitable consequence of the political organization of the nation. In his *Nationalism* lectures, he defines the nation as a collection of people 'organized for a mechanical purpose'. In the printed version of the lectures, he refers to 'the Nation' with a capital N and accuses it of two shortcomings: one, it is an organization or a machine, and two, it is designed for the achievement of narrow and selfish goals. According to him, a true society does not have any ulterior goals or objectives. It is merely a 'natural' arrangement for regulating the innate urge of self-expression of each person through his or her relations with others. One relatively minor aspect of this arrangement is security, which in turn gives rise to statecraft. But statecraft concerns the practices and techniques of material power; there is no possibility there of pursuing the spiritual ideals of human life. Unfortunately, Europe discovered one day that, with the help of science and organization, it could extend the force of material power to such extremes that the entire globe could come under its sway, giving it access to unlimited riches from every part of the world. Thus began the race between nations for greater military power and material wealth, as a consequence of which humanity was presented with the horrors of imperialism and a world war (Tagore 1996[1917]b: 421). A political organization or 'machine' that is engaged solely in the pursuit of the material interests of the nation can never achieve the overall well-being of people and was, instead, more likely to cause overall harm. 'Even if the whole world proclaims that material results are the ultimate end of human life, let India never accept it: that is the boon I seek from the maker of our

destiny. After that, if we achieve political freedom, well and good. If not, let us not block the path to a greater freedom with the rubbish of polluted politics' (Tagore 1960c: 258). 'Some of our young men, drunk on the political liquor sent from foreign distilleries, have now taken to fighting among themselves. Seeing them, I often think that while we have enough indigenous crimes of our own, those who import these foreign ones are making the burden of our sins even more unbearable' (Tagore 1960d: 281). 'We have been begging for our liberty from a West that is itself in the throes of death. What can this dying creature give us? A new state system in place of the old state system? ... We will never gain our freedom from a gift of charity – no, never. Freedom belongs to our inner selves' (Tagore 1960e: 69).

It hardly needs to be said that Rabindranath's critique of the nation as a western state organization did not emanate from some nativist pride of Hindu greatness. It is true that he often talked about the ideal of *dharma* that he believed was the moral foundation of the Aryan civilization in India. He frequently referred to this as the natural property of Indian civilization or the unique historical path that India must follow. But even there, what prevailed in his thinking was the universality of that ideal – the eagerness to make one's own that which was different and new but a force for the good. This urge for universality is what impelled him to condemn in the strongest possible terms the orthodox ritualism of the Hindu religion or its oppressive discriminations of caste. It is the same urge that made him claim that his idea of *svades* should not be restricted to any particular nation but should instead encompass the world. However, Rabindranath's critique of the mechanical pursuit of self-interest embodied in the social organization of the modern West cannot be equated with a socialist or Marxist critique, for those ideologies were in his eyes equally guilty of celebrating the mechanical organization of the modern state. Then what is the appropriate framework for evaluating Tagore's political thinking?

It could be suggested that Tagore's critique of materialism and his ideal of a reconstructed community were close to Gandhi's ideas. But, as a matter of fact, there is more difference than similarity. Despite the mutual respect and friendliness between them, there were some fierce and well-known political debates in which the two were involved. Several scholars have discussed these debates.<sup>3</sup> I wish to point to one difference that has not been sufficiently commented upon.

### Tagore and Gandhi

In 1921, Tagore described Gandhi's emergence on India's political scene as representing the struggle of truth against the politics of tactical manipulation.

At this time, Mahatma Gandhi appeared at the door of millions of India's poor – dressed like them, speaking to them in their language. This figure possessed a quality of truth that had nothing to do with the evidence of books. That is why the name that has been given to him – 'Mahatma', the great soul – is a true name. Who else has made so many Indians his own kin? ... The politics that depends on cunning is a barren politics: we should have learnt this lesson a long time ago. The Mahatma has now clearly shown us the enormous strength of truth. Cunning is the natural *dharma* of the cowardly and the weak. To destroy it, one has to cut through its skin. That is why many clever men in our country still prefer to see the efforts of the Mahatma as akin to the covert moves of a political game of dice. Their minds, corrupted by falsehood, cannot bear to admit that the love that is now sweeping through the heart of the country is not an irrelevant thing – that this indeed is freedom, the country finding itself. Whether the English are still here or not hardly matters. This love is self-revelation ... this is what I call the liberation of my country. Revelation is freedom. (Tagore 1960b: 297–298)

We should note that in Tagore's view, the manner in which Gandhi had become

the kin of millions of Indians had nothing to do with the truth contained in books. It was the truth of love, of the heart. To mix such love with the tactical cunning of politics was to show contempt for it. Yet, to his dismay, the Gandhian movement, in its struggle to attain independence, soon took the path of political cunning and organizational discipline.

I see a huge weight pressing down on the country's mind. An external force seems to compel everyone to say and do the same things. ... Why this compulsion? ... The country is being assured that it will get a very coveted thing – very soon and very cheap. ... Is it not immensely worrying that most people in the country have happily accepted, without debate, and indeed forcibly suppressing all debate, that Swaraj [or self-rule] will come on a particular day of a not-too-distant month – that is to say, that they have surrendered the freedom of their own judgment and robbed the same freedom of others? Is it not to rid ourselves of this evil spirit that we look for the shaman? But when the shaman himself shows up as the evil spirit, there is no end to our troubles. (Tagore 1960b: 298–299)

Tagore's regret becomes sharper if we reverse the statement. It was to rid the country of the politics of cunning that the people had chosen Gandhi as their shaman. Now Gandhi himself was imposing the demon of tactical cunning and organizational discipline on the people. Not only that, he was forcing them to adopt such a narrow programme of action that their minds would be, on the one hand, imprisoned within the dull monotony of endlessly turning the spinning wheel and, on the other, intoxicated by the frenzy of the boycott.

A penance imposed through forcible compulsion cannot rid us of our sins. I have said many times before, and will say it again, that the lure of material gain must not be allowed to destroy our minds. If the Mahatma wants to fight against that machine which oppresses the whole world, we are on his side. But

we cannot join this struggle by relying on that besotted, entranced, blind force of obedience that is at the root of all the miseries and indignities in this country. Our main battle is against that force. If we can drive it away, only then will we get self-rule, both within and outside us. (Tagore 1960b: 303)

The grounds of difference are clear. The people had unhesitatingly accepted the truth that Gandhi had revealed before them because that truth was above politics – unconfined by the machinery of organization, untouched by the tactical deceit of political cunning. But the promise of obtaining independence within one year or the programme of spinning and boycott had brought back the same organizational politics of tactical cunning. Spinning and boycott were extremely narrow programmes that lacked the support of science and enlightened reason.

The question is: would not the economic and political system of true self-rule have to run according to the logic of the machine? Do we know any other science that uses some other logic? A careful reading of Tagore shows that his criticism of Gandhi's movement was that because of its reliance on organization and political artifice, it was tarnished by statism. On the other hand, when he invokes reason and science to criticize the programme of hand spinning, he is stepping into the same statist frame of thought. Indeed, Tagore and Gandhi were not equally, and in the same sense, opposed to the modern state.

As an alternative to the Gandhi programmes, Rabindranath proposed the establishment of cooperatives. Tagore's objection to Gandhi's Swaraj programme was that it was too narrow; it did not have an adequately comprehensive ideal of the variety of human life.

For this reason, I believe that if we have to inspire the country in the true quest for Swaraj, we must make the full image of Swaraj directly visible to all. This image may not be very extensive at this time, but we must insist that it be comprehensive and true. ... I consider it

essential that we do not restrict the duty of the *svades* merely to the spinning of thread, but spread it across the country in many small and localized efforts. The well-being of all is a combination of many things. ... If the inhabitants of even one village can, by their efforts of self-making, make the entire village their own, then the work of finding the *svades* can begin there. (Tagore 1960f: 341–342)

Once again, the ideal space for constructing Swaraj becomes restricted to a single village. It is not difficult to suggest that the example of one village may be replicated by others. But how the ideal of comprehensiveness can be so replicated across the country without the use of 'the machine' is not explained in Rabindranath's proposal. Gandhi's Swaraj programme, on the other hand, did offer a definite solution to the problem of replicability, which is why the Gandhian movement, with all its limitations and contradictions, and irrespective of Gandhi's own personal views on the subject, has become part of the Indian nation, of Indian democracy and of popular political culture in India. The specific techniques of Gandhian *satyagraha* have been used as instruments of struggle in numerous movements in the United States, South Africa, Palestine, and elsewhere. By comparison, Tagore's ideas on the cooperative are largely forgotten.

### One's own country in a single village

The point is important not merely for our understanding of what was distinctive about Tagore's attempt to think out a political form alternative to that of the nation, but of many similar experiments throughout the 20th century at creating in a microcosmic locality the forms of the large political community, whether of the nation or of something else. The distinctive feature of the local experiment is always that it retains the immediacy of the face-to-face community, and uses its vast resources of deep and dense inter-personal memories to invoke trust and innovate subtle solutions. Not

only Tagore, but from Gandhi himself and scores of Gandhians to innumerable others inspired by various communitarian dreams, many people have, through the last century, carried out hundreds of such local community-building efforts in villages all over India. Some may have been motivated by a feeling of nostalgia for some lost idyllic arcadia. It is also a remarkable, though not quite well explained, fact of modern Indian intellectual history that most such builders of rural cooperative communities were city-bred middle-class activists who saw their calling in discovering the future forms of the modern Indian village rather than those of the Indian city – but that is not the relevant point here. In a century of growing violence and conflict between politically mobilized groups, it is undoubtedly true that the face-to-face local community offered many cultural resources to accommodate diversity, even deviance and some degree of contained violence, within the familiar limits of shared trust and tolerance. This is what most activists and thinkers looked to when they chose to focus on the local community. The point has been forcefully made in recent times by Ashis Nandy in the context of inter-religious or sectarian violence in India (Nandy *et al.* 1997).

The crucial question is: how does this new local community multiply itself? How can it succeed in producing the macrocosmic political community in its own image? There are two possible answers to this question. One is to take the local variations seriously and argue that each local community, embodying a specific configuration of social relations and a distinct tradition of local memories, is unique. The particular form of community institutions and practices that works at one place need not work at others. Hence, one form developed in one village must not be simply transported to and copied by other villages; each village must develop its own suitable and unique form of community. Arguing from this position, it is hard to see how a large political community of the same order of magnitude as the nation can ever be imagined. Clearly, the nation as a community cannot be

produced by the additive aggregate of thousands of distinct villages; its sense of community must be produced imaginatively in its fullness as a single construct, all its parts existing synchronically and simultaneously on a single plane. That is precisely what the cultural technologies of nation-construction enable. The face-to-face methods of local community construction can never achieve that task. The qualities of everyday familiarity, sympathy, or the ability to inventively use local resources for local solutions, which were of such crucial importance in the local sphere, have little import in nation-construction.

One could get around this problem by introducing a series of mediations – by State institutions, for instance, or by political parties, or by large and organized political movements that aspire to become the State. That was the idea pursued by the Gandhian Congress, and by many other movements of varying national and regional influence. The distinct autonomy of local community building may be allowed, even encouraged, but only within certain larger parameters set by ‘national’ institutions. The mediating institutions between the local and the national thus perform the tasks of direction and command, of setting norms of conduct and rules of discipline. The autonomy of the local then necessarily becomes a subordinate moment of the independently produced ‘national’.

Following his interrogation of the Gandhian movement, Tagore no longer felt inclined to approve of these supervening state or party institutions. He saw them as leading the creative energies of the local into the familiar forms of the western nation-state based on command, discipline and competitive self-aggrandizement. Thus, the distinctive feature of Rabindranath’s thinking in its late phase was its insistence on building the new local community, with its rich diversity and creativity, all the time hoping that it might become an exemplary instance for the whole country, but without conceding any directing role to any superordinate homogenizing State or State-like political institutions.

There is a second answer to the question of how the results of local experiments may be replicated on a wider scale. Here, the local initiative does not attempt to be total and comprehensive; it does not seek to refashion the community in its wholeness. Rather, it seeks to develop specific practices with appropriate institutions. When successfully developed in a local context, these could acquire the form of a set of techniques that may be transported elsewhere after being released from their local constraints. There are many examples of such experiments first carried out in local communities that have now become technologies, widely used in many different contexts and replicated on a national, even global scale. The history of China in the 20th century has many such examples. To mention an example from Bengal, think of the initiative of a young university lecturer in Chittagong soon after the birth of the new nation-state of Bangladesh. Moved by sympathy, dedication and the urge to do something to alleviate the desperate poverty all around him, he brought together a few associates, raised a small fund and began a project of offering tiny amounts of credit to rural women to supplement their incomes. The most interesting feature of the experiment was that it built on the element of mutual trust and dependence characteristic of the face-to-face community but did not seek to embrace or transform the local community itself. As is now well known, the little initiatives of Mohammed Yunus ultimately produced the techniques of the micro-credit movement that are now being replicated in many parts of the world. Judged by its impact, it is probably the most influential local community initiative carried out in Bengal in the 20th century. As technology, its practices have been appropriated within the circuits of capital as well as of governmental power. But since they are techniques, those practices are also in principle open for mobilization by forces resisting capital or governmental power. These questions are very much part and parcel of our contemporary political life.

### Tagore and romanticism

During his China visit in 1924, Tagore reiterated several of the central themes of his social and political ideas, but focused on the history of Asia. 'There was a time,' he said,

when Asia saved the world from barbarism. Then came the night, I do not know how. And when we were aroused from our stupor by the knocking at our gate, we were not prepared to receive Europe who came to us in her pride of strength and intellect. The West came not to give of its best, or to seek for our best, but to exploit us for the sake of material gains. ... We did Europe injustice because we did not meet her on equal terms. The result was the relation of superior to inferior; of insult on the one side and humiliation on the other. ... We must rise from our stupor and prove that we are not beggars. ... Some of us in the East think that we should copy and imitate the West. I do not believe it. (Tagore 1996b)

He also continued his argument against the cult of materialism. 'I have my own idea, superstition if you like, that no people in Asia can be wholly given to materialism. There is something in the blue vault of its sky, in the golden rays of the sun, in the wide expanse of the starlit night, in the procession of its seasons, each bringing its own basket of flowers, which somehow gives to us an understanding of the inner music of existence; and I can see that you are not dead to it'. He pointed to all the beautiful things he had seen in China. 'What is it that you have done by making things beautiful? You have made, for me who has come from a distant country, your things hospitable by touching them with beauty'. Even ordinary things used in daily life could be made beautiful. 'Gross utility kills beauty. We have now all over the world a huge production of things, huge organizations, huge administrations of empire, obstructing the path of life'. He then returned to his central message: 'It is your mission to prove that love for the earth, and for the things of the earth, is possible without materialism – love without the strain of greed' (Tagore 1996c).

On the second day of Rabindranath's public lectures in Beijing on 10 May 1924, a leaflet was circulated among the audience containing a list of charges against the poet.

1. We have had enough of the ancient Chinese civilization, which crushed the people and enriched the prince, which subjected women and exalted men, ... We want no more of them! But Mr. Tagore wants to take us back to the civilization of those bygone ages. Therefore we must protest against him.
2. Our agriculture, which hardly feeds our peasants, our industry which is strictly household industry, our carts and boats which go only a few miles a day, our monosyllabic language and our ideographic writing, our printing which has remained at the stage of carved wood-blocks, our streets which are latrines, and our deplorably dirty kitchens have made us lose our reputation throughout the world. And here Mr. Tagore comes to reproach us for our excess of material civilization! How can we fail to protest against him?
3. Wars without rhyme or reason, pillage and rapine, ... shameless prostitution, rapacious mandarins devouring the people, ... women making their beauty consist in the mutilation of their feet – behold the flower of the ancient Chinese civilization which Mr. Tagore calls spiritual and to which he would like us to return .... We therefore protest against Mr. Tagore.
4. Our present ills have been caused in large part by the indifference in public matters of too great a number of our fellow citizens. It is this apathy which has allowed the militarists and the foreign powers to dare anything and to do everything. And now Mr. Tagore finds that we torment our souls too much by worrying about such things ... he says there is no further need for nations or for governments. It suffices for each individual ... to drown himself in universal, abstract love and in

illusions of peace. ... In a word, this doctrine is hypnotism...

5. We have already had our ancient theory of Yin and Yang, our Taoism and Confucianism ... And now after the Lord on high in whose name this was already being preached to us, Mr. Tagore proclaims the abode of Brahma to which we must return our souls in order to gain salvation ... To preach this doctrine is to preach inaction, passivity ... Therefore we protest, in the name of all the oppressed peoples, in the name of all the persecuted classes, against Mr. Tagore ... We also protest against the semi-official literati who have invited Mr. Tagore to come to hypnotize and drug our Chinese youth in this way, these literati who use his talent to instil in Young China their conservative and reactionary tendencies.<sup>4</sup>

Tagore decided enough was enough. He cancelled his remaining public lectures and, during the rest of his visit, spoke to only small groups of people in private meetings. The historian Kalidas Nag, who had accompanied Tagore, wrote in his diary: 'This is more than enough for today's China' (Nag 1987: 43). In his last speech in Shanghai before his departure, Tagore betrayed some trace of bitterness: 'Some of your patriots were afraid that, carrying from India spiritual contagion, I might weaken your vigorous faith in money and materialism. I assure those who thus feel nervous that I am entirely inoffensive; I am powerless to impair their career of progress, to hold them back from rushing to the market place to sell the soul in which they do not believe. I can even assure them that I have not convinced a single sceptic that he has a soul, or that moral beauty has greater value than material power. I am certain that they will forgive me when they know the result' (Tagore 1996d).

In his speeches during his China visit, Tagore did not in any way dilute his powerful criticism of the very idea of the modern nation. In its mature form, this criticism involved a questioning of the political

organization of the modern nation-state and its practices of strategic and rhetorical cunning. Tagore's complaint was that modern political organizations imposed a set of disciplinary constraints and collective demands that were too narrow and too coercive to allow for the full range of diversity of human life. This was the ground for his difference with the main course of the Indian nationalist movement represented by the Gandhian Congress. As an alternative, he attempted to build in a small rural locality a new community that would rid itself of the irrationalities and injustices of the traditional society but, in producing a modern social form, retain the immediacy of the face-to-face community. The unresolved problem was that this local microcosm could not be reproduced on a country-wide scale without resort to the modern technologies of nation-building. Hence, Tagore's idea of a modern community that could be an alternative to the nation-state found no political support in his own country.

Nevertheless, Tagore's position remains an example of the ethical critique of the modern state and its political processes of representation – an ethical stance that is primarily aesthetic. This is best illustrated by considering the late Rabindranath. We notice, in the last two years of his life, a deep sense of despondency about political action.

The true springs of popular resistance against injustice have, through long years of neglect, become decrepit. I have lost hope. ... There was a time when one could fight with the force of arms and bravery. But now there is science, based not only on educated intelligence but also on the immense power of money. Yet we have to fight with empty coffers and a popular mobilization that is not disciplined by the rules of collective work. Its powers either lie unconscious or rush around blindly. ... We have seen much amassing of untaught crowds. They may be used to break up the great ceremonies of power, but they do not yield fruits of lasting value. In fact, when confronted by sheer brute force, they break into pieces and scatter. (Tagore 1960g: 384–385)

And finally, there was his last cry of despair uttered only a few weeks before his death in August 1941:

In the meanwhile the demon of barbarity has given up all pretence and has emerged with unconcealed fangs, ready to tear up humanity in an orgy of devastation. From one end of the world to the other the poisonous fumes of hatred darken the atmosphere. The spirit of violence which perhaps lay dormant in the psychology of the West, has at last roused itself and desecrates the spirit of Man. ... I had at one time believed that the springs of civilization would issue out of the heart of Europe. But today when I am about to quit the world that faith has gone bankrupt altogether. As I look around I see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization strewn like a vast heap of futility. (Tagore 1996[1941])

The aspect of the modern state that disturbed Tagore most profoundly in his last years was the 'scientization' of power, the attempt to reduce the multifarious social exchanges among people to certain rules of technology. This is what he had earlier repeatedly condemned as the dominance of 'the machine'.

It is in this sense that his stance of rejection, on ethical grounds, of the politics of mass mobilization, popular representation and strategic manoeuvre remains attractive to some people today. Tagore often made a distinction between construction and creation and always thought that creation, and not construction, was the more important and true expression of the human spirit (Tagore 1996e). Rabindranath's distinction was, of course, a familiar one. Construction is the making of something with an eye to a tangible result; it is functional or utilitarian. Creation is to make something without any specific goal; it is made merely out of the joy of creation. The distinction is fundamental to romantic aesthetics. Rabindranath uses the distinction to argue that the modern science of the West is busy with construction, but human life can never find a lasting good without

creation. That creative task must be done by the people of the East. This is the argument about 'the machine' that he made so frequently during his China visit.

For Tagore, a fundamental condition for the efflorescence of free human life was the guarantee of the aesthetic freedom to be creative without any heed to utility or interest. A political process dominated by the pursuit of individual rights, group interests and the will of the majority is inimical to the requirements of creative freedom. An ethical position such as this is, needless to say, unlikely to find a large democratic constituency. But in an age dominated by technological rationality and the statistical norm, it remains an attractive ethical counterpoint for the intellectual critique of modernity. For those who value an aesthetic critique of technological rationality and material progress, it is in this politically disengaged sense that Tagore remains relevant for our time.

Recall, for instance, Václav Havel arguing in 1975–77 that the traditional forms of parliamentary politics 'can offer no fundamental opposition to the automatism of technological civilization' and that exemplary and inspirational dissidence was the only effective form of resistance to the totalitarian state. This was an early moment of the invocation of universal humanity for a new politics of human rights that has mobilized in the last three decades many idealist persons disillusioned with traditional forms of political organization. The human rights movement today is grounded in a moral stance that abjures politics but valorises the individual act of conscience. Tagore's aesthetically grounded critique of the nation certainly resonates with much of the recent invocations of universal humanity. Once again, Tagore in his late years may have anticipated a strand in our contemporary global culture today. For their part, his Chinese critics in 1924 were perhaps voicing some of our contemporary criticisms of the transnational politics of human rights. In both respects, Tagore's China visit is worth remembering.

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## Notes

1. The author has discussed Tagore's writings on the nation extensively in Chatterjee (2005) *Prajā o tantra*, chapters 4 and 5.
2. The two most exhaustive discussions of Tagore's China visit are in Hay (1970), Das and Tan (1985).
3. The most recent discussion is in Bhattacharya (1997).
4. Full translation in Hay (1970: 170–171).

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