

INTRODUCTION

Travelling with Tagore

Rammohan Roy was able to assimilate the ideals of Europe so completely because he was not overwhelmed by them; there was no poverty or weakness on his side. He had ground of his own on which he could take his stand and where he could secure his acquisitions. The true wealth of India was not hidden from him, for this he had already made his own. Consequently he had with him the touchstone by which he could test the wealth of others.

—Rabindranath Tagore, writing in 1908

It is easier to preach passionately to a country that it should adopt some vast, revolutionary ideology, and centralise and simplify and subordinate everything to a single goal or a single man or a single party. It is not difficult to call for a return to the past, to tell man to turn their backs on foreign devils, to live solely on one's resources, proud, independent, unconcerned. India has heard such voices. Tagore understood this, paid tribute to it, and resisted it.

—Isaiah Berlin, writing in 1961

‘Why Tagore?’ asked a brilliant young mathematician of me recently. He was referring to a newspaper column where I had spoken of Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and B.R. Ambedkar as the ‘four founders’ of modern India. ‘I can see why you singled out the other three,’ said the mathematician. ‘Gandhi led the freedom movement, Nehru nurtured the infant Indian state, Ambedkar helped write its Constitution and gave dignity to the oppressed. But why Tagore?’

My questioner was no ordinary Indian. He comes from a family of distinguished scholars and social reformers. Like his father and grandfather before him, he had been educated at a great Western university but came back to work in India. Like them, he is well read and widely travelled, and yet deeply attached to his homeland. He fluently speaks three Indian languages. If an Indian of his sensibility had to be convinced of Tagore’s greatness (or relevance), what then of all the others?¹

Tagore’s reputation, within India and outside it, has suffered from his being made a parochial possession of one province, Bengal. It was in Bengali that he wrote his poems, novels, plays and songs, works that are widely read and regularly performed seven decades after his death. The poet Subhas Mukhopadhyay recalls ‘a time when the elite of Bengal fought among themselves to monopolise Tagore. They tried to seal off Tagore, cordoning him away from the [sic] *hoi polloi*.’ Then he adds: ‘There was another trend, serving the same purpose, but in a different way. In the name of ideology and as the sole representative of the masses, some tried to protect the proletariat from the bourgeois poet’s harmful influence!’²

The Bengali communists have since taken back their hostility to Tagore—now, they quote his verses and sing his lyrics with as much gusto as their (bourgeois) compatriots. But he remains the property of his native heath alone. This geographical diminution of the man and his reputation has been commented upon by that other great world traveller and world citizen of Bengali extraction, the sitar player Ravi Shankar. In his autobiography, the musician writes that ‘being Bengali, of course, makes it natural for me to feel so moved by Tagore; but I do feel that if he had been born in the West he would now be [as] revered as Shakespeare and Goethe . . . He is not as popular or well-known worldwide as he should be. The Vishwa Bharati are guarding everything he did too jealously, and not doing enough to let the entire world know of his greatness.’³

Ravi Shankar compared Tagore to the German genius Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832); so, before him, had the critic Buddhadeva Bose. Both men, remarked Bose, ‘participate[d] in almost everything’.⁴ Certainly, no one since Goethe worked in so many different fields and did original things in so many of them. Tagore was a poet, a novelist, a playwright, a lyricist, a composer and an artist. He had good days and bad, but at his best he was outstanding in each of these fields.

Tagore’s poems and stories are mostly set in Bengal. However, in his non-fiction, that is to say in his letters, essays, talks and polemics, he wrote extensively on the relations between the different cultures and countries of the world. Tagore, notes Humayun Kabir, ‘was the first great Indian in recent times who went out on a cultural mission for

restoring contacts and establishing friendships with peoples of other countries without any immediate or specific educational, economic, political or religious aim. It is also remarkable that his cultural journeys were not confined to the western world'.⁵ He visited Europe and North America, but also Japan, China, Iran, Latin America and Indo-China.

That these travels were undertaken without any instrumental purpose marks Tagore out from the other members of our great quartet. Gandhi studied law in London and later went to South Africa to work. After he finally returned to India, in 1915, he visited England, once, to negotiate with the British government. Apart from a short trip to Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon), he did not otherwise travel abroad in the last three decades of his life. As a young man, Ambedkar went to the United States and the United Kingdom to acquire advanced degrees in law and economics. Then he came back to a life of social activism in India. In later years, his trips overseas were to participate in political or academic conferences.

At first glance, Nehru seems to have matched Tagore as a world traveller. Nehru first went overseas as a boy, to study at an English public school. Later, in the 1920s and 1930s, he travelled through Europe to forge links between the Indian freedom struggle and the world socialist movement. Still later, as prime minister of India between 1947 and 1964, he visited many different countries and continents. He went in his official capacity, representing and negotiating for his nation. Before and after Independence, Nehru's journeys abroad were thus wholly political. (The one exception was when his wife fell seriously ill, and had to be taken to Europe for treatment.)

On the contrary, Tagore travelled to other lands out of curiosity, simply to see and speak with humans of a cultural background different from his own.

II

Rabindranath Tagore's internationalism was in part a product of his family background. He was born in 1861, the youngest child of Debendranath Tagore, who was a pioneer of modern education in Bengal and also versed in the Upanishads. Debendranath's father, Dwarkanath, was a friend and associate of the great, western-oriented reformer Rammohan Roy (1772–1833). The Tagores followed Roy into the Brahmo Samaj, a reform sect that had revolted against Hindu orthodoxy and polytheism. Their social experimentation was undoubtedly helped by their wealth—the family owned large tracts of land in eastern Bengal and had also profited from the opium trade to China.

In a letter written in January 1885 to his friend Pramatha Chaudhuri, Tagore spoke of the tension in his own mind between the contending forces of East and West. 'I sometimes detect in myself,' he remarked, 'a background where two opposing forces are constantly in action, one beckoning me to peace and cessation of all strife, the other egging me on to battle. It is as though the restless energy and the will to action of the West were perpetually assaulting the citadel of my Indian placidity. Hence this swing of the pendulum between passionate pain and calm detachment, between lyrical abandon and philosophizing between love of my country and mockery of patriotism, between an itch to enter the lists and a longing to remain wrapt in thought.'

Quoting this precocious passage, the Tagore scholar Swapan Majumdar says that it ‘strikes the keynote in his understanding of the West’.⁶ Tagore’s mission to synthesize East and West was part personal, part civilizational. In time it also became political. In the early years of the twentieth century, the intelligentsia of Bengal was engulfed by the swadeshi movement, where protests against British rule were expressed by the burning of foreign cloth and the rejection of all things western. After an initial enthusiasm for the movement, Tagore turned against it. His ambivalence was expressed in his novel *Ghare Baire (Home and the World)* and, more succinctly, in a letter written to a friend in November 1908, which insisted that ‘patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter’. ‘I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds’, wrote Tagore, ‘and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live. I took a few steps down that road and stopped: for when I cannot retain my faith in universal man standing over and above my country, when patriotic prejudices overshadow my God, I feel inwardly starved’.⁷

Tagore’s internationalist views and orientations were to find powerful public expression in his book *Nationalism*, which was based on lectures delivered in Japan and the United States in 1916 and 1917. I shall come to that book presently, but let me first introduce a lesser-known essay that forms the essential prehistory to it. Entitled ‘East and West in Greater India’, this was published in the Bengali journal *Prabasi* in August–September 1908—that is, at the height of the swadeshi movement. The printed text was based on lectures delivered by Tagore at different venues in Bengal.

The essay begins by deprecating the sectarianism and xenophobia that lay at the heart of nationalist politics. ‘Whether India is to be yours or mine,’ said Tagore, ‘whether it is to belong more to the Hindu, or the Moslem, or whether some other race is to assert a greater supremacy than either—that is not the problem with which Providence is exercised. It is not as if, at the bar of the judgement seat of the Almighty, different advocates are engaged in pleading the rival causes of Hindu, Moslem or Westerner, and that the party that wins the decree shall finally plant the standard of permanent possession. It is our vanity which makes us think that it is a battle between contending rights—the only battle is the eternal one between Truth and untruth’.

He continued: ‘If India had been deprived of touch with the West, she would have lacked an element essential for her attainment of perfection. Europe now has her lamp ablaze. We must light our torches at its wick and make a fresh start on the highway of time. That our forefathers, three thousand years ago, had finished extracting all that was of value from the universe, is not a worthy thought. We are not so unfortunate, nor the universe, so poor’.

Tagore held up, as exemplars, his family preceptor Rammohan Roy and the Maharashtrian jurist Mahadev Govind Ranade. He said of Roy that ‘with a wonderful breadth of heart and intellect he accepted the West without betraying the East’. Meanwhile, ‘in the Deccan, Ranade spent his life in the making of this same bridge between East and West’. Unlike the chauvinists of Tagore’s day, both Roy and Ranade had worked ‘to clear the way for an acceptance of whatever elements in the British are of value for the true History of India’.

While deploring xenophobia, Tagore admitted that colonial rule in India was far from being the West at its best. Thus, 'in no capacity, be it as magistrate, merchant, or policeman, does the Englishman present to us the highest that his racial culture has attained, and so is India deprived of the greatest gain that might have been hers by reason of his arrival; on the contrary, her self-respect is wounded and her powers deprived on every side of their natural development'. The India in which he lived and worked was marked 'by this failure of East and West to come together. Bound to be near each other, and yet unable to be friends, is an intolerable situation between man and man, and hurtful withal'.

A characteristic Indian reaction to the fact of colonialism was an unthinking deference, and a second reaction, an equally unthinking defiance. Tagore was uncomfortable with both. 'Those of us who go to the Englishman's durbar with bowed heads and folded hands, seeking emoluments of office or badges of honour,—we only attract his pettiness and help to distort his true manifestation in India. Those, again, who in a blind fury of passion would violently assail him, succeed in evoking only the sinful side of the Englishman's nature'.

Indians complained of colonial arrogance, and yet they treated their own people so badly. So long as landlords regarded tenants as their personal property, so long as high castes looked down on low castes, 'so long shall we not have the right or power to demand from the Englishman proper behaviour towards ourselves'. These cleavages of class and status, believed Tagore, had to be healed not by 'tall talk nor violence', but by 'sacrifice and service'.

The poet ended his essay/lecture in an exhortative but not unhopeful vein. 'At every turn,' he remarked:

in her religion, in her *samaj*, in her daily practice—does the India of to-day fail to do justice to herself. She does not purify her soul by sacrifice, and so on every side she suffers futility. She cannot meet the outsider on equal terms and so receives nothing of value from him. No cleverness or violence can deliver her from the sufferings or insults of which the Englishman is but the instrument. Only when she can meet him as his equal, will all reason for antagonism, with it all conflict, disappear. Then will East and West unite in India, country with country, race with race, knowledge with knowledge, endeavour with endeavour. Then will the History of India come to an end, merged in the History of the World which will begin.⁸

Swapan Chakravorty has pointed out that Tagore's essays in *Prabasi* were in the nature of an auto-critique. When the swadeshi movement began, Tagore had published several poems and songs apparently endorsing its agenda. He was then chastised by some contemporaries for fanning the flames. As the essayist Ramendrasundar Trivedi remarked, while Tagore 'never advised futile and pointless bluster', he nonetheless 'contributed in no small measure to the excitement and frenzy of the time'. These criticisms went home. Or, to put it in Tagore's own words, 'I took a few steps down the road, and then stopped'.⁹

III

In the summer of 1912, Rabindranath Tagore visited England, a country he had been to twice before. He was carrying some

translations of his poems, which were misplaced on the London Underground. Fortunately, they were retrieved from the 'lost luggage' department of the Underground. Shortly afterwards, Tagore struck up a friendship with W.B. Yeats, who helped him refine the translations. Published by the India Society under the title *Gitanjali*, these poems were an immediate sensation, going through ten printings in six months. In November 1913, Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.¹⁰

The Nobel Prizes had been in existence only a decade, but had acquired a considerable prestige. Tagore was the first Asian winner in *any* category. He was already known in Europe and the United States (which he had visited, after finishing with Yeats and company, in that summer of 1912), but the Nobel award gained for him a massively enhanced status within India, and across Asia. The award was seen as an acknowledgement of the importance of a continent anxious to reclaim its past greatness. Thus, when Tagore arrived for the first time in the Japanese capital of Tokyo in June 1916, some 20,000 people turned out to receive him at the city's central railway station.

Tagore was very keen to visit Japan. Some years previously, he had made the acquaintance of Okakura Tenshin, the leading Japanese art historian and art curator of his day. Okakura spent nine months travelling in India in 1902, much of it in Bengal, where Sister Nivedita, the Hindu nun of Irish extraction, helped him finalize the manuscript of his book *The Ideals of the East*. Here Okakura spoke of three 'mighty' Asian civilizations, India, China and Japan, while placing his own country at the apex. Japan, he argued, had synthesized and

elevated all that was best in Indic and Chinese culture and history.¹¹

At the time Okakura wrote his book, his country was in many respects recognizably in advance of India and China. It had been not conquered by the Europeans, a freedom the Japanese used to imitate the methods of those who had subordinated their fellow Asians. The Meiji Restoration of 1868 had set in motion a series of important changes: land reform in the countryside, the willing acceptance of factory methods of production in the cities and a reorganization of the military according to European (or more specifically Prussian) models. By the first years of the twentieth century, Japan was clearly the power to look out for in Asia. Already, in 1895, it had subjected China to a humiliating military defeat. A decade later it was to vanquish a more powerful adversary on the battle field—this victory, over Russia, ranking as the first achieved by an Asian country over a professedly European one. Then, in 1910, it flexed its muscles further by annexing the Korean peninsula.

In 1916, a speaking bureau based in New York offered Tagore \$12,000 to undertake a lecture tour in the United States. He agreed, because it would allow him to raise money for his school in Santiniketan. That he would go via Japan was an added attraction.¹² As he had written to a scholar from that country, ‘I want to know Japan in the outward manifestation of its modern life and in the spirit of its traditional past. I also want to follow the traces of ancient India in your civilization’.¹³

Tagore’s first speech in Japan was delivered in Osaka on 1 June 1916. It was reported in the newspapers under the heading ‘Tagore Curses Civilization’. The characterization

was not inaccurate, for within a week of arriving in Japan the poet had concluded that ‘all the civilized nations [were] being pressed into the modern mold and [were] assuming the same form or lack of form’.¹⁴ As a British intelligence agent wrote of a later speech in Tokyo, ‘Tagore harps on the evils of European civilization and on [the] mission of Japan to lead in the spread of the higher idealled [sic] Asiatic civilization. Not the kind of speech one would hope to hear from a member of the British Empire—but perhaps he should be given poetic license’.¹⁵

Tagore’s talks in Japan, written up and revised, form a central chapter of *Nationalism*. A special responsibility devolved on Japan, as the first Asian country to engage with the modern world. Tagore could not believe that ‘Japan has become what she is by imitating the West’. As he reminded his audience, ‘you have the freedom to use the materials you have gathered from the West according to your genius and your need’.¹⁶

The materials Tagore himself was willing to gather from the West were its fabulously rich art and literature, its spirit of justice, its knowledge and its science. Those things he had long loved, but now, in the midst of the most destructive conflict in history (the First World War), they were overshadowed by other and darker attributes. In a brilliant passage, he wrote that ‘The political civilisation which has sprung up from the soil of Europe and is overrunning the whole world, like some prolific weed, is based on exclusiveness. It is always watchful to keep the aliens at bay or to exterminate them. It is carnivorous and cannibalistic in its tendencies, it feeds upon the resources of other peoples

and tries to swallow their whole future. It is always afraid of other races achieving eminence, naming it as a peril, and tries to thwart all symptoms of greatness outside its own boundaries, forcing down races of men who are weaker, to be eternally fixed in their weakness.’¹⁷

The choices before Asia were sometimes presented as fear or flattery, between lying ‘passively dormant, or feebly imita[ting] the West’. Japan could, if she wished, show a third way—to embrace the best of the West without damage to her cultural traditions. (While disenchanted by the outward show of nationalism and militarism, Tagore was very impressed by the sophistication of Japanese aesthetics, as manifested in their gardens, and the decorations and layout of their homes and shrines.) ‘True modernism’, the poet told his audience, ‘is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste. It is independence of thought and action, not tutelage under European schoolmasters.’¹⁸

Tagore’s hopes and fears for Japan were expressed in interviews to the press before he left the country’s shores. He advised the Japanese ‘to avail of the fruits of Western civilization, but not to be caught in its meshes’. When a correspondent from the *Manchester Guardian* asked whether the ‘Eastern outlook can be reconciled with the mechanism of Western civilization’, he answered that ‘it can and must be’. He himself conceived ‘of a kind of federation of nations in which each contributes its own characteristic philosophy’. The Japanese, he discovered, ‘think it their country’s mission to unite and lead Asia’. Tagore did not necessarily contest this ambition. But he pointedly asked: ‘Has she in view a federated or an imperialized Asia? In military and naval power, and in

commerce and industry, she is already the foremost country in the East. In things purely of the intellect and spirit she is not'.¹⁹

Through his talks in Japan, Tagore had moved (in Stephen Hay's felicitous phrase) 'from poetry to prophecy'. He had used his standing as an artist to sound a tocsin against the wholesale embrace of modern civilization. His hosts were not entirely receptive. Since the Japanese national experience was untinged by colonialism, their intellectuals were more optimistic about what they could get from the West. One novelist complained that 'Tagore doesn't even mention the possible use of material civilization for the benefit of all mankind'. A leading philosopher said sarcastically that Tagore's voice was 'like the song of a ruined country'. As 'the people of a rising nation', he added, 'I think we should make every effort especially to exclude the Indian tendency towards pessimism and dispiritedness'. An English journalist long resident in Kobe thus captured the reaction to the Indian visitor: 'Tagore's contempt for mere nationalism is naturally the bitterest pill for the Japanese to swallow, since from the cradle to the grave the importance of being Japanese is firmly impressed upon them. How can they put nationalism behind them? Surely such a doctrine can only be preached by a man whose country has lost its independence—by an inhabitant of a pale, decaying land, where all things droop to ruin'.²⁰

IV

From Japan, Tagore sailed on to the United States, reaching the Pacific port city of Seattle in the last week of September

1916. Two weeks later he wrote to his son Rathindranath of how he had it in mind to make his school in Santiniketan ‘the connecting thread between India and the world. I have to found a world centre for the study of humanity there. The days of petty nationalism are numbered—let the first step towards universal union occur in the fields of Bolpur. I want to make that place somewhere beyond the limits of nation and geography—the first flag of victorious universal humanism will be planted there. To rid the world of the suffocating coils of national pride will be the task of my remaining years.’²¹

Tagore stayed four months in North America, criss-crossing the continent, addressing audiences, large and small, on the perils of nationalism. Like Japan, the United States had not entered the First World War; like Japan, it was free to make its destiny other than in the image of Europe. Thus far, noted Tagore, ‘the spirit of conflict and conquest’ had been at ‘the centre of western nationalism’. The decades of a greed-driven expansion had now reached their nadir, ‘when this cruel war has driven its claws into the vitals of Europe, when her hoard of wealth is bursting into smoke and her humanity is shattered into bits on her battlefields’. The cult of the Nation, as practised by the nations of Europe, led inevitably to an escalating cycle of conflict, where ‘machine must be pitted against machine, and nation against nation, in an endless bullfight of politics’.

But perhaps this newest of Western nations could show a different way. Tagore admired the ‘experimentalism [that] is a sign of America’s youth’. Unlike the Europeans, the Americans were not intrinsically colonialist: ‘your history has been disinterested and that is why you have been able to help

Japan in her lessons in western civilisation and that is why China can look upon you with her best confidence'. 'America is destined to justify western civilisation to the East', the poet told his hosts, hopefully: 'you are carrying all the responsibility of a great future because you are untrammelled by the grasping miserliness of a past'.²²

Once more, the audience was less than impressed by the visitor's warnings. A columnist in the *Minneapolis Tribune* wrote sneeringly that Tagore was the 'best business man who ever came to us out of India', who scolded Americans 'at \$700 per scold', while pleading with them at '\$700 per plead'. The poet was denounced in editorials, review essays and letters to the newspapers. The literary historian Sujit Mukherjee summarizes the American criticisms of Tagore's lectures in these words: 'When Tagore said that Western society was being dehumanized by excessive organization, it was pointed out that lack of organization had not brought happiness to India. When Tagore spoke out against British rule in India, history was cited to show that of all the rulers of India, the British had been the most just. When Tagore warned America against greedy commercialism, it was said that this very prospect of money-making had brought Tagore to this country. The most serious charge against Tagore was that by denouncing nationalism wholesale, he was . . . debasing the principles which were then being defended in Europe, preaching social anarchy through denigrating organization, even subverting American youth by advocating pacifism'.²³

The prejudices of ordinary Americans were shared by their intellectuals. After Tagore's lectures were published in book form, they were subjected to a blistering attack in print

by the Yale geographer Ellsworth Huntington. The geographer admired the poet's 'inimitable style'; as he put it, 'it is wonderful that a man who uses English which is ungrammatical can hold the reader's attention so steadily'. But he had less patience with the contents. 'Stripped of its fascinating imagery and rhythmical language,' remarked Huntington, 'Tagore's book is merely a protest against the way in which the energy of the West imposes itself upon the indolence of the tropics'. After he had read through half the book, the reviewer wrote a note to himself describing it as 'a vivid appeal of the weak, impotent, but brainy man of the tropics against the overmastering power of the "nations" which live in the temperate zone'. In Huntington's view, 'Tagore seems to oppose the idea of a nation because he belongs to a race which has no nation of its own. Such a race is to be pitied, not blamed'.²⁴

In the early twentieth century, the United States, like Japan, was eager to announce itself on the world stage. Its citizens had successfully settled a whole continent; now, they were constructing cities and factories that in size and productivity would comfortably exceed those in England and Germany (the two countries from which the bulk of the settlers had come). Economic growth was matched by a growing political ambition. The United States had already displaced Spain as the major force in Latin America, and it had lately acquired possessions and interests in Asia.

Japan, from the Far East, and the United States, from the Far West, both sought to achieve regional and in time global dominance through the more focused use of scientific knowledge and political organization. In other words, they sought to outdo Europe by the means of Europe. Naturally,

they had little time and less patience with the scoldings of a seer from a poor and defeated land.

V

After his return from Japan and North America, Tagore set about creating his centre for the study of humanity. He named the university 'Visva-Bharati', which may be translated as 'India in the World', or alternatively as 'The World in India'. Its Memorandum of Association described its objectives as the bringing together of 'thinkers and scholars of both Eastern and Western countries, free from all antagonisms of race, nationality, creed or caste' and the realization 'in a common fellowship of study [of] the meeting of East and West'.

Tagore raised money for his new university through friends in India, and by subscriptions from abroad. In the summer of 1920 he undertook an extended trip of Europe and North America for the purpose. He landed first in England, his arrival coinciding with the debates in the House of Commons over the fate of the 'Butcher of Amritsar', General Reginald Dyer. Dyer had ordered his troops to fire on a peaceful and unarmed crowd of Indians in April 1919. More than four hundred people died in the firing. The act caused great revulsion throughout India—it gave an impetus to the nationalist movement, and Tagore himself was moved to return his knighthood. Now, a year later, he found the politicians and public in Britain had issued a clean chit to Dyer. He was dismayed by this 'unashamed condonation of brutality'. His faith in British justice had been shattered. As he wrote to an English friend: 'Your Parliament debates about

Dyerism in the Punjab and other symptoms of the arrogant spirit of contempt and callousness about India have deeply aggrieved me and it was with a sense of relief that I left England'.²⁵

Tagore travelled across the Channel, to find himself 'in a delightful country, in a delightful place in France, meeting with people who are so human'.²⁶ He visited other countries in Europe, came back to Britain, and then, in the winter, crossed the Atlantic to go to North America. Everywhere, he gave speeches and met potential donors, working ceaselessly to drum up support for his university. In the spring of 1921, he crossed the ocean again. He was received with respect in England, and rapturously in Germany. The demand for the German editions of his novels and stories was so colossal that a million kilograms of paper had to be imported from America to print them.²⁷

A Bengali sociologist, then studying in Europe, remarked that 'the reception which Dame Teotonia, both official and non-official, academic and non-academic, has offered to the maker of Young India's creed of life, almost everywhere at a moment's notice, is unparalleled in the annals of ovation which monarchs, generals, poets or preachers may ever have received in the two hemispheres'.²⁸

The Bengali's admiration was not shared by a rising (and German-speaking) Marxist critic named George Lukacs. Lukacs believed that the award of the Nobel Prize to Tagore was orchestrated by the English bourgeoisie, which by that act was 'repaying its intellectual agent in the struggle against the Indian freedom movement'. The Indian visitor, he claimed, was 'as imaginative writer and as thinker—a wholly

insignificant figure'. For the Marxist, 'Tagore's enormous celebrity' among Germany's literati was 'a typical sign of the total cultural dissolution facing this "intellectual elite"'.²⁹

It was true that, unlike in rationalist France, thinkers who thought in more cultural terms had an easier time of it in Germany. Tagore was fêted in that country in part because he spoke of matters of the spirit and in part because he was seen as anti-British.³⁰

A vivid account of Tagore's trip to Germany is contained in the memoirs of his German publisher, Kurt Wolff. Like very many others, Wolff was struck by the poet's physical form. As he recalled, 'with his long grayish-white beard and dignity, he [Tagore] presented a most impressive figure, so that it seemed a completely natural error when my three-year-old daughter assumed God was paying us a visit, and settled contentedly in the lap of the Lord'. But Wolff was also impressed by the poet's lack of insularity—namely, that rather than talk about himself or his work, 'what interested [Tagore] most was Germany, and he posed simple, precise, intelligent questions', about the costs of war, of the future of German literature, and the like. Writing forty years later, he remembered the conversations which 'revealed the universal breadth of Tagore's learning', and which demonstrated 'without doubt that he knew far more of the West than most of the Europeans he encountered knew of the East'. Tagore had spoken, among other things, of the work of T.S. Eliot. 'It is quite remarkable,' said Wolff, 'that someone born in India in 1861 should display such an interest in and grasp of an Anglo-American poet thirty years his junior'.³¹

As it happens, while travelling overseas, Tagore had

received reports from India of what (in his view) were the excessively anti-British views of his own countrymen. In the last weeks of 1920, Mahatma Gandhi had launched a countrywide movement of 'non-cooperation'. This involved the boycott of British-run schools, colleges and law courts, and the burning of foreign cloth. Reading the reports of burnings and boycotts, and reading also the exhortative words of the leader which accompanied them, brought back for Tagore memories of the swadeshi movement, when a popular upsurge had likewise steered this dangerously unstable course between patriotism and xenophobia.

Tagore had admired Mahatma Gandhi even before he had met him. In 1913, he sent a personal subscription to Gandhi's struggle for the rights of Indians in South Africa.³² The next year, Tagore's close friend, the English Christian priest Charles Freer Andrews, went to South Africa to work with Gandhi. Andrews spoke glowingly of the poet's work; thus, when Gandhi finally returned home to India, he sent an advance party of his ashram (which included three of his sons) to Tagore's school in Santiniketan. He and his wife followed shortly afterwards.

The admiration between protester and poet was mutual and wholly genuine. Even if he was not the first to call Gandhi 'Mahatma', it was certainly Tagore who popularized and legitimized that appellation. In turn, Gandhi hailed the poet as 'Gurudev', as preceptor not just to him but to the entire Indian-nation-in-the-making.

Gandhi's new movement for non-cooperation provoked mixed feelings in Tagore. His ambivalence was expressed in letters written to their mutual friend C.F. Andrews from

various stops on his Euro-American tour. A letter dispatched from Paris on 18 September 1920 noted the fact that 'our countrymen are furiously excited about Non-co-operation'. Tagore wished the emotion would flow along constructive channels, hoping that Gandhi would take the lead in starting independent organizations across India. If that happened, said the poet, 'I shall be willing to sit at his [Gandhi's] feet and do his bidding, if he commands me to co-operate with my countrymen in service of love. I refuse to waste my manhood in lighting the fire of anger and spreading it from house to house'.

Lest he be accused of lack of patriotism, Tagore added: 'It is not that I do not feel anger in my heart for injustice and insult heaped upon my motherland. But this anger of mine should be turned into the fire of love for lighting the lamp of worship to be dedicated through my country to my God. It would be an insult to humanity, if I use the sacred energy of my moral indignation for the purpose of spreading a blind passion all over my country.'

The letter ended by asking Andrews to tell the poet's nephew Surendranath to translate into English the essays he had written in the first decade of the century 'during the great political excitement over the partition of Bengal'. He hoped an English version 'will be useful in the present situation', in cautioning his countrymen against an unproductive hatred of the foreigner.³³

The next month Tagore sailed for the United States. He read about Gandhi's continuing movement in the American papers, and, presumably in more detail, in letters coming to him from India. On 14 January 1921, he wrote to Andrews

that, to him, humanity was 'rich and large and many-sided. Therefore, I feel deeply hurt when I find that, for some material gain, man's personality is mutilated in the western world and he is reduced to a machine. The same process of repression and curtailment of humanity is often advocated in our country under the name of patriotism'. Three weeks later he wrote from New York that he was 'afraid I shall be rejected by my own people when I go back to India. My solitary cell is awaiting me in my Motherland. In their present state of mind, my countrymen will have no patience with me, who believe God to be higher than my own country.' Then he added, defiantly: 'I know such spiritual faith may not lead us to political success; but I say to myself, as India has ever said, Even then—what?'

In a letter posted from Chicago on 5 March 1921, Tagore observed: 'What irony of fate is this that I should be preaching co-operation of cultures between East and West on this side of the sea just at the moment when the doctrine of non-co-operation is preached on the other side?'³⁴

Tagore had reservations about non-cooperation from the start. Soon, he began having reservations about its leader. While he was in North America, a recent article by Mahatma Gandhi had been brought to his attention. Entitled 'Evil Wrought by the English Medium', it claimed that 'Rammohun Roy would have been a greater reformer, and [the nationalist] Lokmanya Tilak would have been a greater scholar, if they had not to start with the handicap of having to think in English and transmit their thoughts chiefly in English'. Gandhi argued that 'of all the superstitions that affect India, none is so great as that a knowledge of the English language is necessary for

imbibing ideas of liberty, and developing accuracy of thought'. As a result of the system of education introduced by the English, 'the tendency has been to dwarf the Indian body, mind and soul'.³⁵

Tagore was dismayed by the general tenor of the article, and by its chastisement of Rammohan Roy in particular. On 10 May 1921, he wrote to C.F. Andrews from Zurich saying: 'I strongly protest against Mahatma Gandhi's trying to cut down such great personalities of Modern India as Rammohan Roy in his blind zeal for crying down our modern education'. These criticisms, added Tagore tellingly, showed that Gandhi 'is growing enamoured of his own doctrines—a dangerous form of egotism, that even great people suffer from at times'.

The Mahatma believed Rammohan Roy was limited by his excessive familiarity with English. To the contrary, Tagore argued that through his engagement with other languages the reformer 'had the comprehensiveness of mind to be able to realize the fundamental unity of spirit in the Hindu, Muhammadan and Christian cultures. Therefore he represented India in the fulness of truth, and this truth is based, not upon rejection, but on perfect comprehension. Rammohan Roy could be perfectly natural in his acceptance of the West, not only because his education had been perfectly Eastern,—he had the full inheritance of the Indian wisdom. He was never a school boy of the West, and therefore he had the dignity to be the friend of the West'.³⁶

C.F. Andrews shared the letter with the press. The criticisms stung Gandhi, who immediately published a clarification in his journal *Young India*. He pointed to his own friendship with white men (Andrews among them), and the

hospitality granted to Englishmen by many non-cooperators. Neither he nor his flock was guilty of chauvinism or xenophobia. His defence was then summed up in these words: 'I hope I am as great a believer in free air as the great Poet. I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any'.³⁷

No modern man provided posterity as many quotable lines or phrases as Gandhi. Even so, the sentences cited above must be among the most regularly quoted of the millions of words the Mahatma wrote or spoke. They are to be found in classrooms, in museums, in auditoria and on banners, as a succinct statement of Gandhi's openness to other cultures while remaining loyal to his own. However, while I have quoted four sentences, these other invocations choose only to use the last three. Omitted always is the crucial opening caveat: 'I hope I am as great a believer in free air as the great Poet.'

In July 1921, Tagore returned home from Europe. He was alarmed to find that many members of the staff at Santiniketan had enthusiastically embraced the non-cooperation movement, thus giving themselves up to 'narrow nationalist ideas that were already out of date'. In the first week of September, Gandhi met Tagore at his family home in Calcutta. They had a long and argumentative conversation about non-cooperation. C.F. Andrews, who was present, wrote that they had 'a difference of temperament so wide that it was extremely difficult to arrive at a common intellectual standing, though the moral ties of friendship remained entirely

unbroken'.³⁸ Tagore later recalled that he had told Gandhi that 'the whole world is suffering today from the cult of a selfish and short-sighted nationalism. India has all down her history offered hospitality to the invader of whatever nation, need or colour. I have come to believe that, as Indians, we not only have much to learn from the West but that we also have something to contribute. We dare not therefore shut the West out. But we still have to learn among ourselves how, through education, to collaborate and achieve a common understanding'.³⁹

Gandhi's answer is not recorded. But apparently Tagore was not satisfied, since he chose to make his criticisms public in the influential Calcutta journal *Modern Review*. In his recent travels in the West, said Tagore, he had met many people who sought 'to achieve the unity of man, by destroying the bondage of nationalism'. He had 'watched the faces of European students all aglow with the hope of a united mankind'. Then he returned home, to be confronted with a political movement suffused with negativity. Are 'we alone to be content with telling the beads of negation', asked Tagore, 'harping on other's faults and proceeding with the erection of Swaraj on a foundation of quarrelsomeness?'⁴⁰

Gandhi responded immediately, defending the non-cooperation movement as 'a refusal to co-operate with the English administrators on their own terms. We say to them, "Come and co-operate with us on our terms, and it will be well for us, for you and the world". . . A drowning man cannot save others. In order to be fit to save others, we must try to save ourselves. Indian nationalism is not exclusive, nor aggressive, nor destructive. It is health-giving, religious and

therefore humanitarian. India must learn to live before she can aspire to die for humanity. The mice which helplessly find themselves between the cat's teeth acquire no merit from their enforced sacrifice'.⁴¹

Eighty years on, the Tagore–Gandhi debate still makes for compelling reading. The Mahatma insisted that a colonized nation had first to discover itself before discovering the world. The poet answered that there was a thin line between nationalism and xenophobia—besides, hatred of the foreigner could later turn into hatred of Indians different from oneself (he was particularly sceptical of the claim that non-cooperation had or would dissolve Hindu–Muslim differences). Both men come out well, Tagore slightly better perhaps. He stood his ground, whereas Gandhi shifted his, somewhat. Pressed and challenged by Tagore, he broadened his nationalism to allow in winds from all parts of the world.

VI

In the decade after the award of the Nobel Prize, a steady stream of poems, stories and plays poured forth from Tagore's pen. His output was prodigious—especially when we consider how much he travelled and talked during this time. Other activities included the raising of funds and the crafting of a curriculum for his international university. For a man now in his sixties, his zest was extraordinary. His creative energies were undimmed; in fact they were to grow in unexpected directions (as when, in his late sixties, he discovered painting).

Meanwhile, through his travels in the East and West, the poet had become a prophet, and hence also a polemicist. That

little book, *Nationalism*, marked the beginning of a wide-ranging engagement with the question of how different countries and civilizations should relate to one another. His views were expressed in his speeches, and in a slim collection of essays first published in London in 1922 under the title *Creative Unity*. One essay, entitled 'The Nation', revisited the themes of *Nationalism*. This identified the current 'Cult of the Nation' as a danger to humanity, for 'the greater the amount of success' the cult enjoyed, 'the stronger are the conflicts of interest and jealousy and hatred which are aroused in men's minds, thereby making it more and more necessary for other peoples, who are still living, to stiffen into nations. With the growth of nationalism, man has become the greatest menace to man'.⁴²

The essay most relevant to the present discussion was called 'East and West'. It should be read as an afterword to *Nationalism*, just as the similarly titled essay of 1908 might be read as a prelude to that book.⁴³ Tagore here deplored the 'cold-blooded utilitarianism' dominant in the West, which was 'ready to enslave or kill individuals', yet was 'wholly wanting in spiritual power to blend and harmonise; it lacks the sense of the great personality of man'. He himself had no doubt that 'the West owes its true greatness, not so much to its marvellous training of intellect, as to its spirit of service devoted to the welfare of man'. Therefore he spoke 'with a personal feeling of pain and sadness about the collective power which is guiding the helm of Western civilisation'.

Tagore then referred to 'the Western poet' (whom he leaves unidentified), who said of East and West that 'never the twain shall meet'. He admitted 'they are not yet showing

any real sign of meeting'. However, the reason for this was that 'the West has not sent out its humanity to meet the man in the East, but only its machine. Therefore the poet's line has to be changed into something like this:

Man is man, machine is machine,
And never the twain shall wed.'

Speaking of colonial rule in India, Tagore told his British readers that 'you must know that red tape can never be a common human bond; that official sealing-wax can never provide means of mutual attachment; that it is a painful ordeal for human beings to have to receive favours from animated pigeon-holes, and condescensions from printed circulars that give notice but never speak'.

In the middle of this essay, Tagore recalled a Swede named Hammargen who, back in the nineteenth century, had read about Rammohan Roy and come to Bengal. He lived in Bengali homes, eating Bengali food, teaching the children French and German. When Hammargen died, he was cremated according to his wishes, his ashes mingling with the soil of his adopted land. This 'obscure individual from Sweden', remarked Tagore, 'brought to our country the chivalrous courtesy of the West, a greeting of human fellowship'. There were thus two paths for the West in the East—one was contained in the example of Hammargen, the other, in the use and ubiquity of red tape and sealing wax.⁴⁴

VII

In the summer of 1924 Tagore went to China for the first time. He visited the major cities—Shanghai, Peking, Nanjing—

and also travelled through the countryside, in territories controlled by warlords. His university, Visva-Bharati, produced a report of his trip, with his speeches and meetings reconstructed from newspaper reports. So far as I know the report has not been reprinted. But it remains an immensely valuable document, not least for its account of a speech delivered by Tagore on 25 April 1924 to the Anglo-American Association of Peking. Here, the poet provided, as it were, a personal reception history of that key text, *Nationalism*, speaking of why he had spoken as he did, and of what his audiences made of him. He recalled that on his way to America in 1916:

I passed through Japan and while there I realised for the first time, or really not the first time, but more strongly than ever, the terrible suffering with which the whole world was afflicted. I saw in Japan the war trophies from China publicly exhibited. I failed to understand this gloating attitude, this joy in the humiliation of another nation which had suffered defeat . . . I spoke to several Japanese friends about this national attitude of mind and learned from them that such a bellicose spirit was necessary in order to train the minds of people so that they would be ready for future warfare.

Tagore continued:

Fortunately, this was not the only side of Japan that I saw. I saw also old world people actuated by motives of simple hospitality, kind men and women filled with the poetry of life, whose love of the beautiful in art created feelings of deepest admiration.

Their beautiful ceremonials, their reverence for antiquity, their quiet and frequently secluded everyday life, seemed quite at variance with a bellicose attitude.

Now the poet spoke of his next stop on that tour:

The lectures I then wrote were delivered in the United States. There again I saw the same spirit of exclusive, deliberate cultivation of contempt for other races. This was neither Christian in a people who were supposed to be Christians, nor was it prudent. It must some day end in universal disaster to humanity.

Tagore then recalled what he saw on his return to his own country:

In India, when I spoke to my own people of what the whole world was suffering from, they replied that I was trying to make them weak. They wanted to be ferocious and unscrupulous. They had no time to waste on higher ideals. It was the law of nature, the survival of the fittest, in which they believed.

After these dispiriting experiences, Tagore got renewed hope from his visit to Europe in 1921:

Following the end of the War I went to Europe where I was received with a warmth of welcome which overwhelmed me. I could not believe that it was because of my books or my work. Then I decided that it must be that the nations of the West were looking for some new ideal from the East which would reconstruct their civilization on a better basis.

This looking to the East touched me deeply. I realised the great responsibility and felt that I must in my own humble way help to bring together the two hemispheres which were drifting apart every day.

With this aim I founded Visva-bharati in which I endeavoured to give expression to the ideal of the present age. The peoples of the world have come close to one another through science but they must also come near in spirit in order to give truth to the fact of external closeness.⁴⁵

Tagore was optimistic that his message would resonate in China, that other great civilization seeking a place of its own in the modern world. In his first talk in Shanghai he expressed the hope that ‘some dreamer will spring from among you who will preach a great message of love and therewith overcoming all differences bridge the chasm of passions which has been widening for ages . . . Asia is again waiting for such dreamers to come and carry on the work not of fighting, not of profit making, but of establishing bonds of spiritual relationship’.⁴⁶

As in Japan, large crowds turned out to hear Tagore speak in China. He made a certain impact; as the *Peking and Tientsin Times* observed, ‘On the platform and in private life Tagore is equally impressive. In his physical appearance—his tall spare form, his ample gray hair and beard, his olive complexion, his almost Semitic features; in his carriage—slow, deliberate, dignified, in his voice, look and manners—gentle, sweet, dreamy and withal spiritual; in his dress—long flowing robe, skull cap, Chinese shoes (the one jarring element of his Western *pince-nez* excepted); in all these things is fulfilled our traditional conception of the oriental seer and patriarch’.⁴⁷

To be sure, there were some Chinese listeners who appreciated his words as much as his presence. These included the members of the 'Crescent Moon' movement, a group of young poets who had named their programme after one of Tagore's own anthologies of poetry. A Chinese admirer, Xu Zhimo, acted as the poet's interpreter, and so had more opportunities than others to listen to and understand him. He wrote of what he saw and heard in terms more fulsome than any offered even by the Bengali worshippers of Tagore:

His great and tender soul, I dare say, is a miracle in human history. His unlimited imagination and broad sympathy makes us think of Whitman; his gospel of universal love and zeal for spreading his ideas remind us of Tolstoy; his unbending will and artistic genius remind us of Michelangelo, the sculptor of Moses; his sense of humor and wisdom makes us think of Socrates and Lao-tzu; the tranquility and beauty of his personality remind us of Goethe in his old age; the touch of his compassion and pure love, his tireless efforts in the cause of humanitarianism, his great and all-embracing message sometimes make us recall the Saviour of mankind.⁴⁸

Not all Tagore's listeners were as welcoming. Some were unhappy with his apparent rejection of machinery, others with his apparent pacifism. In the 1920s, the youth in China were flocking towards communism, a doctrine which has little patience with dreaming poets of any nationality. As it happens, in the winter of 1923–24, on the eve of Tagore's visit, an opinion poll taken in Peking University found that 725 out of

1007 students favoured 'people's revolution' as the surest way to 'save China'. Asked which country was China's best friend, 497 chose Soviet Russia, and only 107 the United States. Asked whom they considered the greatest man outside China, as many as 227 voted for the Soviet leader V.I. Lenin. The former American president Woodrow Wilson came a poor second, with fifty-one votes. The philosopher Bertrand Russell was placed third with twenty-four votes, while Tagore himself came fourth with seventeen votes (Gandhi was ranked twelfth, with nine votes).⁴⁹

So, when this lesser god came to their land, radical Chinese students distributed pamphlets at his speeches, saying they had enough of ancient civilization, with its exploiting landlords, its 'wars without rhyme or reason', its primitive agriculture and starving peasants. The protesters spoke 'in the name of all the oppressed peoples, in the name of all the persecuted classes, against Mr Tagore, who works to enslave them still more by preaching to them patience and apathy'. The left-wing novelist Shen Yen-ping said the Chinese were '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 by the imperialists from without, this is no time for dreaming'. Another scholar, Wu Chih-hui, wrote with disgust of how 'Mr Tagore . . . a petrified fossil of India's national past, had retreated into the tearful eyes and dripping noses of the slave people of a conquered country, seeking happiness in a future life, squeaking like the hub of a

wagon wheel that needs oil'.⁵⁰ A third commentator characterized the ideas offered by the visitor as the 'morphine and coconut wine of those with property and leisure'.⁵¹

Tagore's reception in China was dispassionately summed up by a Japanese newspaper. The poet, it remarked, 'has not altogether appealed to some of the elements in China. He is too willing to recognise the good in Western institutions and too truly intellectual to suit the present phase of acute nationalism in this country'.⁵² To his credit, the lecturer stood his ground. They could reject him, he told an audience in Peking, but he retained the 'right as a revolutionary to carry the flag of freedom of spirit into the shrine of your idols—material power and accumulation'.⁵³

VIII

On his way back from China, Tagore stopped in Japan. This time, he took care to direct his message at the women. In a talk in Osaka he suggested that while men had a 'weakened spiritual faith', women had a 'natural sensibility for religion'. Tagore told the women of Japan that 'it is your function, to save the tender grace of life of your people from the scorching heat of scepticism, to rescue it against the misrule of blind passion, to keep stirring energy in men's hearts for best aspiration, an energy which is creative of great ideals'. Meanwhile, to male audiences he expressed a sense of self-vindication. 'I have come to warn you in Japan,' he remarked, 'the country where I wrote my first lectures against Nationalism at a time when people laughed at my ideas to scorn . . . But I stuck to my conviction and now after the war, do you not

hear the denunciation of this spirit of the nation, this collective egoism of the people which is universally hardening their hearts'.⁵⁴

Five years later the poet was back in Japan. On this as on previous occasions, he recalled his friendship with Okakura Tenshin. The invocation was strategic as well as sentimental. It was from Okakura that the poet and his circle 'first came to learn that there was such a thing as an Asiatic mind'. His Japanese friend, recalled Tagore, inspired in people he met 'an aspiration not only for the good of their own country but for all humanity'.⁵⁵

It was on this, his third trip, that Tagore was acquainted with the unhappy experiences of aliens in Japan. Korea had become a Japanese colony in 1910—and the reports he had received powerfully reminded him of his own experience as a subject in colonial India. On previous occasions, Tagore had made himself unpopular for speaking honestly about the excesses of Japanese nationalism—now, he added to the indictment the more recent excesses of Japanese colonialism. He observed that the 'treatment of alien races in the East is beginning to show signs of that supercilious contempt and want of consideration which in the West is justified in the name of patriotism'. Tagore warned his hosts that 'you must know that the day comes when the defeated have their chance of revenge; that people have long memories and wrongs rankle deep in their heart; times of trouble are sure to come to all nations when the weak can bring fatal disaster to the stronger. The warnings of providence are often silent, and politicians do not heed to them. And therefore I appeal to you as representatives of your people, win [the Koreans'] love

whom you can be foolish enough to bully into a sullen subjection, make them trustworthy by trusting them and by respecting them, train them into self-respect which is for your own good.’⁵⁶

IX

In the summer of 1930, Tagore entered his seventieth year. This Bengali poet had wandered a great deal, but not, apparently, enough for his own taste. He had seen the great nations of the West, and of the East. Now, he set off on a journey to Soviet Russia, a land that was both East and West, and which was undertaking a unique political experiment besides. In a two-week trip through Russia, Tagore visited schools and factories, saw films directed by Sergei Eisenstein and operas by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakoff. He listened, spoke and, in one city, even exhibited his paintings.

In letters written home, Tagore expressed a measure of admiration for the Soviet experiment. As a result of the Russian Revolution, ‘suffering humanity has a nobler vision of itself on the world stage than before’, since ‘at the very threshold of the rich invincible Western civilization Russia has raised the seat of power for the dispossessed’. He was struck by the number of workers and craftsmen who visited art galleries in Moscow, which before 1917 had been patronized only by the aristocracy. But what really impressed him was the banishment of the scourge of illiteracy. He wrote of the Russian school system that ‘although in spreading the Soviet doctrine they have raised brute force above the force of logic, they have not discarded logic altogether’. His hope seemed to

be that since learning of any kind opened the mind, by spreading education the communist regime may have unwittingly sowed the seeds of its democratization. His inclination to give his hosts the benefit of the doubt was also aided by the fact that 'in the background of the picture of Russia that has taken shape in my mind lurks the dark misery of India'. In its own way, the Russian experiment could inspire and provoke his own poor, backward, agricultural and largely illiterate land.⁵⁷

The appreciation was not unqualified, however. Before leaving the Soviet Union, Tagore gave an interview to the newspaper *Izvestia*. He praised the 'amazing intensity' with which the Soviets had spread education, then added these caveats: 'I must ask you: Are you doing your ideal a service by arousing in the minds of those under your training, anger, class hatred and revengefulness against those not sharing your ideals, against those whom you consider to be your enemies? True, you have to fight against obstacles, you have to overcome ignorance and lack of sympathy, even persistently antagonism. But your mission is not restricted to your own nation or own party, it is for the betterment of humanity according to your light. But does not humanity include those who do not agree with your aim?'

In Tagore's opinion, the social (and political) system must permit 'disagreement where minds are allowed to be free'. For 'it would not only be an uninteresting but a sterile world of mechanical regularity if all our opinions were forcibly made alike. If you have a mission which includes all humanity, acknowledge the existence of differences of opinion. Opinions are constantly changed and rechanged only through the free

circulation of intellectual forces and moral persuasion. Violence begets violence and blind stupidity. Freedom of mind is needed for the reception of truth; terror hopelessly kills it’.

‘Therefore, for the sake of humanity,’ said Tagore in leaving Russia, ‘I hope that you may never create a force of violence which will go on weaving an interminable chain of violence and cruelty. Already you have inherited much of this legacy from the Tsarist regime. It is the worst legacy you possibly could have. You have tried to destroy many of the other evils of that regime. Why not try to destroy this one too?’⁵⁸

X

There were still other lands that Tagore wished to see. Among them was Iran, or Persia as it was then known. The influence of Persia was manifest in Indian art, literature and music—not least, the art, literature and music Tagore had grown up with. (Persian had once been the language of administration in Bengal.)

Tagore finally got to see Persia in 1932, when he was past seventy. On his way there, he reprised, in his diary, the themes of *Nationalism*. ‘In Japan’s blood,’ he noted mournfully, ‘has entered the poison of imperialism from the West; and her neighbours are wrought to a state of agonized apprehension . . . If the new age has indeed come to Asia then let Asia give voice to it in her own special idiom of civilization. If instead of that she imitates the roar of Europe, even if it be a lion’s roar, yet it will sound pitifully unreal’.

In Persia, Tagore met the Shah, and visited the tomb of

the poet Hafiz. He noted the parallels between Persian and Mughlai food, and admired the gardens. He was particularly impressed by the communal concord, the apparent harmony between Shias and Parsis and Bahais. Listening to a music recital, he regretted the fact that Indian music had not been adequately receptive to European influences. He observed that ‘the influence of eastern art on European paintings . . . has not spelt a doom for the Western art and culture’. Thus ‘who, indeed, can firmly assert that our own music assimilating alien strains will not be able to retain its own identity?’ In his view, ‘the interaction of various arts invigorates each culture to make it many splendoured’.⁵⁹

The year after his visit to Iran, Tagore wrote an essay called ‘The Changing Age’, a long, reflective look at what he had learnt and unlearnt about the relations between East and West. First, he compared India’s foreign rulers past and present. While ‘on the personal plane’, the British ‘remained farther away from us than the Muslims’, as ‘emissaries of the European spirit they made a contact with us wider and deeper than that of their predecessors. The dynamism of Europe made a vigorous assault on our stagnant minds—it acted like the torrents of rain that strike into the dry under-earth, give it vital stirrings and bring forth new life’.

Europe, in the shape of Britain, came as a wake-up call to a sleepy, self-satisfied Indic civilization. Tagore looked nostalgically back to the late nineteenth century, the years of his own upbringing. In his opinion, ‘the Victorian period was our time of intensive co-operation with Europe. In fact, whenever our mind was not in contact with the mind of Europe, whenever our education was not in key with the

European system, the loss was ours. This co-operation was easy so long as our regard for Europe suffered no shock’.

By the time the poet had reached middle age the picture had become all too different. In 1914 ‘came the Great War, and all at once a curtain went up on the stage of Western history. It was as though a drunken maniac was revealed in all its starkness’. After that horrible conflict, ‘Western civilization no longer admits any call to a sense of honour. Inhuman cruelty struts in barefaced pride. We see Europe’s best pupil in Asia, Japan, copying in Korea and in China its master’s arrogance of might’.

After the war, the West lay exhausted. When it finally gathered its energies its politics took even uglier forms. Writing in 1933, with Hitler and the Nazis in power, Tagore noted bitterly that the ‘very Europe which had once reviled Turkey now flaunts Fascism. The freedom of self-expression which we had once learnt to look upon as Europe’s great gift is ruthlessly suppressed . . . Italy punishes its political dissentients with transportation to a penal island and it is well known what hell that stands for. And Germany, in which the light of Europe’s culture was at its brightest, has torn up all civilized values—with what ease has an unspeakable devilry overtaken the entire country!’⁶⁰

Tagore was dismayed by the turn to militarism in Italy and Germany, and by its echo, a few years later, in the Asian country of which he had once entertained such fond hopes, namely, Japan. In July 1938, he received a letter from an old friend, the poet Yone Noguchi, asking him to endorse Japan’s recent invasion of China on the grounds that it would establish ‘a great new world in the Asiatic continent’. In justifying the

invasion, Noguchi claimed that ‘nothing worthy will be done unless you pass through a severe trial. And the peace that follows after a war is most important. For this peace we Japanese are ready to exhaust our resources of money and blood’.

The two men had known each other for years; the Japanese writer had even visited Santiniketan. Tagore wrote back expressing dismay that his fellow poet had been overwhelmed by ‘the passion of collective militarism’. Noguchi was prepared to acknowledge that Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia was wrong, yet he ‘would reserve the murderous attack on Chinese millions for judgment under a different category. But surely judgments are based on principle and no amount of special pleading can change the fact that in launching a . . . war on Chinese humanity . . . Japan is infringing every moral principle on which civilization is based’.

Tagore was distressed that instead of questioning the warmongering of their leaders, the ‘artists and thinkers [of Japan] should echo such remarkable sentiments that translate military swagger into spiritual bravado’. Then he offered this telling contrast: ‘In the West, even in the critical days of war-madness, there is never any dearth of great spirits who can raise their voice above the din of battle, and defy their warmongers in the name of humanity’. Where, when their country most needed them, were the Japanese dissenters?

Noguchi, in response, charged Tagore with displaying the ‘quiescence of a spiritual vagabond’.⁶¹

XI

This essay has, somewhat deliberately, ignored Tagore's creative oeuvre—his poems, plays, novels and songs by which he is best known and which are most especially revered in his native Bengal. There, his views on the social and political questions of the day appear indirectly, by allusion. It is in his lesser-known essays and lectures that he writes more directly on such matters as nationalism and internationalism, and the conflict and cooperation of cultures. Admittedly, this methodological focus was also mandated by a linguistic deficiency. I do not know Bengali, so many of the nuances of Tagore's fiction and (especially) poetry would be lost in translation. But I console myself that it is in his non-fiction that we are more likely to find the Tagore who speaks to the world.

The musician Ravi Shankar accused his fellow Bengalis of keeping Tagore to themselves. The charge is not unfounded, but the further insinuation that a single institution, Visva-Bharati, is principally responsible for this diminution is perhaps unmerited. This essay itself has relied heavily on materials first put out by Tagore's own university—on the pamphlets, addresses, anthologies and travelogues issued by it in a steady stream over a period of eight decades and more. It was also Visva-Bharati that first published the last work considered here, a lecture delivered on the poet's eightieth (and, as it happened, last) birthday in 1941.

Tagore had lived through the First World War, and complained most bitterly about it. He had lived through its aftermath, witnessing, with increasing horror, the embrace by

Asian countries of an aggressive nationalism, and the descent of the West into fascism and Nazism. Tagore had also lived through four decades of a popular struggle for Indian freedom, conducted on either side of the Great War. He had sometimes been very critical of the tendencies and manifestations of this struggle, but he did not disagree on its ultimate goal, which was to deliver Indians from alien rule.

Tagore was a patriot who loved his country, without being a nationalist who saw his nation as necessarily superior to other nations. He knew many parts of India other than Bengal. He had studied the high culture of the Upanishads as well as the folk culture of artisans and village musicians. He founded one institution (Santiniketan) aimed at making Indians more aware of the rest of the world, and another institution (Sriniketan) aimed at making elite, urban-based Indians more sensitive to the lifestyle and existential dilemmas of their rural counterparts.

No one could accuse Tagore of not loving his country. This is what lends a special force to his criticisms of nationalism. As he saw it, the staggering heterogeneity of India was the product of its hospitality, in the past, to cultures and ideas from outside. He wished that this openness be retained and even enhanced in the present. Unlike other patriots, Tagore refused to privilege a particular aspect of India—Hindu, North Indian, upper caste, etc.—and make this the essence of the nation, and then demand that other aspects conform or subordinate themselves to it. For Tagore, as the historian Tanika Sarkar has pointed out, India ‘was and must remain a land without a centre’.⁶²

Tagore must surely have expected India to become a self-

governing republic in his lifetime. At the moment he turned eighty, he would have felt this failure most keenly. India was still not free; worse, the nations of Europe had tumbled into another and even more destructive war. It is against the background of this double disappointment that we must confront the depressing, at times despairing, tone of Tagore's last essay, 'The Crisis in Civilization'.

The core of the talk consists of a long, retrospective look at India's engagement with Europe. When they first arrived on Indian shores, the impact of the British had been beneficial—for 'they came to us with a great literary tradition in which they were truly revealed'. Now, towards the end of their stay, the picture (and balance sheet) was so very different. 'When the stream of their two centuries' rule runs dry at last', wrote Tagore, 'what a waste of mud and filth will be revealed, bearing a tale of utter futility! There was a time when I used to believe that the springs of a true civilization would issue out of the heart of Europe. Today, as I am out to quit the world, that faith has gone bankrupt'.

Even in this moment of disillusionment, Tagore had a kind word to say about individual Englishmen. He recalled listening in his 'early youth' to the speeches of John Bright in parliament, when 'his large-hearted radicalism which was far above all nationalist bias made so strong an imprint on my mind that something of it lingers still in these days of sad disillusionment'. In later years, it had been his 'privilege to come in contact with big-hearted Englishmen of surpassing goodness, and it is on account of them that I have not lost faith in the people to whom they belonged.' Among these good Westerners he singled out Charles Freer Andrews, who

had just recently died. In Andrews, the poet 'had for a very close friend an Englishman, a real Christian and a gentleman . . . The memory of Andrews perpetuates for me the nobility in the British heart'.

Tagore mentioned, in passing, the Soviet experiment, which he contrasted favourably with the British one. Whereas 'the British have trampled on the manhood of the subject races under their rule', on the other hand, 'free from racial prejudice, the Soviets have projected all over their domain the power of human fellowship'. Read now, these words sound hopelessly naive—read in context, they are less damaging. Unlike the British, the Soviets had no part in the First World War and had been dragged, willy-nilly, into the second. The truth about the Gulag and the human costs of collectivization were not yet widely known. In any case, in the evening of a life spent in and for humanity, the poet had to believe that life after him would be less brutal and bloody than in his own day. And so, despite his own profound humanism and his own earlier fears about the dangers of class violence, Tagore offered, as a last, consolatory, hope that this latest experiment in multinational living would succeed where the others had failed.⁶³

XII

Five years after Tagore's death, Jawaharlal Nehru published his book *The Discovery of India*. The text is peppered with references to the poet, whom the author saw as one of the two dominant figures of the age (Gandhi being the other). 'More than any other Indian', wrote Nehru, 'he [Tagore] has

helped to bring into harmony the ideals of the East and West, and broadened the bases of Indian nationalism. He has been India's internationalist *par excellence*, believing and working for international co-operation, taking India's message to other countries and bringing their messages to his own people'.

From the evidence of *The Discovery of India*, Nehru had clearly read a great deal of Tagore. He mentions characters in Tagore's plays, invokes his views on the Vedas, and speaks appreciatively of his emphasis on the civilizational ties that once bound India and China. Nehru refers several times to Tagore's last speech, 'The Crisis of Civilization', quoting with a sense of vindication—for he was a fellow traveller himself—his (albeit qualified) admiration for the Soviet experiment. In the book's epilogue, Tagore is held up as an exemplar, as one 'who was full of the temper and urges of the modern age and yet was rooted in India's past, and in his own self built up a synthesis of the old and the new'.⁶⁴

Tagore is also mentioned several times in Nehru's first book, *Glimpses of World History*, which consisted of letters written to his daughter, Indira, from jail. The letter which completed this course of parental instruction invoked the stirring lines from *Gitanjali* which begin 'Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high', and end 'Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake'.⁶⁵

Nehru first met Tagore in the early 1920s, when he accompanied Gandhi to Santiniketan following a Congress meeting in Calcutta. The trip is recalled in Nehru's autobiography, the first footnote of which incidentally mentions the striking coincidence that Tagore was born on the same day in the same month of the same year as his own father, Motilal.

Later visits to the poet's home are also lovingly recalled, with Nehru speaking of how he spent his time in Santiniketan talking to the poet and his circle. In 1934, he took his wife, Kamala, there for the first time. Their only child, Indira Priyadarshini, was appearing for her matriculation, and they were worried about her future education. Nehru believed that the atmosphere of the regular universities was 'official, oppressive and authoritarian'. He hoped that for his daughter 'Santiniketan offered an escape from this dead hand'.⁶⁶

Indira first saw Tagore in September 1932, when the two of them were among the crowd of patriots attending on Gandhi while he was fasting in a prison in Poona. Hearing of the meeting, Nehru wrote to his daughter from his own prison cell in distant Dehra Dun: 'You have met, probably for the first time, another great son of India, Rabindranath Tagore. He is very different from Bapu, but he is a great writer and artist and it is a privilege to meet him'. In later letters to Indira, Nehru frequently quoted or invoked the poet. In June 1934, he sent her the prospectus for Tagore's university, remarking: 'Do not be prejudiced against S[anti] N[iketan]. It has its faults but it has its good points too and I think the latter far outweigh the former'.⁶⁷ The next month Indira became a student of Visva-Bharati. She stayed there until March 1936, when she had to be withdrawn to attend to her ailing mother, then undergoing treatment in Europe. It was the only Indian university she attended.

In his years as prime minister, Nehru followed Tagore in seeking a synthesis of tradition and modernity, in taking from the West what his country needed while upholding and even avowing the civilizational antiquity of India. Nehru's pan-

Asianism, and his determination to stay 'non-aligned' in the Cold War, also bear the mark of Tagore's thought. Meanwhile, his respect for the diversity of cultures and religious traditions within India also owes a great deal to Tagore's example. Like the poet, the politician saw his country as a mix and a *mélange*, which had no single essence. After a long trip through India's north-eastern borderlands in 1952, Nehru wrote to the chief ministers of states that the region 'deserves our special attention, not only [of] the Governments, but of the people of India . . . As one travels there, a new and vaster richness of India comes before the eyes and the narrowness of outlook which sometimes obsesses us, begins to fade away'. He went on: 'Rabindranath Tagore wrote in one of his famous poems about India:—"No one knows at whose call so many streams of men flowed in restless tides from places unknown and were lost in one sea: here Aryan and non-Aryan, Dravidian, Chinese, the bands of Saka and the Hunas and Pathan and Mogul, have become combined in one body"'.⁶⁸

The impact of Tagore's ideas on Gandhi and Nehru has perhaps been given less attention than it deserves. It was through the poet's provocation that these two men developed a theory of nationalism that was inclusive, not exclusive; a nationalism that sought not just political freedom for the Nation but equal rights for all its citizens. Where other nationalisms insisted on a homogeneity of attitudes and world views, the idea of India respected and even celebrated the linguistic, cultural and religious diversity of its peoples. This idea of India was inclusive outside its borders, prepared to overlook the horrors of colonialism once colonialism had formally ended, to forge new and equitable relations with all the countries and peoples of the world.⁶⁹

Here then is one possible answer to the question ‘Why Tagore?’: that the two most influential of modern Indians were shaped and reshaped by their encounters (in person, as well as in print) with the poet. This may be reason enough for the rest of us to recover Tagore, to read him afresh, to sense that his works carry much meaning for those Indians who do not speak Bengali or those human beings who do not live in India.

Perhaps the place to begin this recovery is anywhere other than his creative writings. At least to the non-Bengali ear, his poems can sometimes appear vapid and his songs, utterly monotonous. But how direct and penetrating are his observations on nationalism and internationalism! One of the nicest things about his criticisms is that the chastisement is ecumenical—he does not spare the Americans, or the British, or the Japanese, or even his fellow Indians either. This may indeed be why his warnings were received so badly at the time. For each nationalist thinks that his nation shall be free of the mistakes and errors committed by other nations. British and Japanese imperialism each claimed to be uniquely benign; each professed to be acting in the ultimate best interests of the people they ruled over. By their own self-description, Indian and American nationalism are each uniquely tolerant. They have, apparently, never coveted the resources of other countries. The only wars they have fought have been in self-defence, or to bring to other people the liberties they themselves enjoy.

Tagore saw right through these euphemisms and delusions. Yet his criticisms always had a constructive edge. He could denounce the Nation of the West while acclaiming the Spirit

of the West. Europe had produced Imperialism and Militarism, but also Liberty and Justice; one must resist the former, but seek always to retain the latter. He put it beautifully in *Nationalism*: 'There is one safety for us upon which we may count, and that is that we can claim Europe herself as our ally, in our resistance to her temptations and to her violent encroachments; for she has ever carried her own standards of perfection, by which we can measure her falls and gauge her degrees of failure, by which we can call her before her own tribunal and put her to shame'.⁷⁰

Tagore knew that no nation, culture, ideology or religious tradition had a monopoly of virtue; nor any a monopoly of vice either. All systems of belief were a mixture of good and evil, of truth and untruth. The only way to make one's nation or culture less false was to broaden it by listening to (and learning from) other nations and cultures. Recall, a hundred years later, the warnings against cultural arrogance that he issued in 1908: 'It is not as if, at the bar of the judgement seat of the Almighty, different advocates are engaged in pleading the rival causes of Hindu, Moslem or Westerner, and that the party that wins the decree shall finally plant the standard of permanent possession'.

Addressed to the bigots and xenophobes of his own day, these remarks can be addressed again to those who wish to forcibly impose their own convictions on the rest of humanity, to Al Qaeda and to extremist Hindus, to evangelical Christians and to revolutionary Maoists, to all those who fanatically and violently seek to take permanent possession of the past and future of mankind.⁷¹

Long before me, the great Argentinian writer Jorge Luis

Borges had sensed that there is one Tagore who speaks principally to his fellow Bengalis, but also another Tagore who speaks to (and for) the world. In a review published in 1937 of Tagore's *Collected Poems and Plays*, he spoke witheringly of the poet's 'unconquerable love of vagueness'. The Indian writer, he said, was 'incorrigibly imprecise', while his poetry was 'typically fluid and formless'.⁷² Two decades later, on Tagore's birth centenary, he was asked to write about his book *Nationalism*. This time he was more impressed. He saw it as prescient: written in 1917, but anticipating the later excesses of the national spirit, as in Nazi Germany or during the Second World War or indeed in the Soviet Union, where (as Borges put it) 'under the innocent mask of Marxism the government of Russia is also exercising nationalism'. These developments validated 'the book Tagore wrote about half a century ago'. Borges added that 'the rhetorical emphasis and a certain oriental resignation towards the use of common-places can not hide the sharpness of thought of the author'.

In a later passage, Borges nicely caught the mixture, within Tagore's own soul, of the best of the East and the West. Writers like George Bernard Shaw 'rejected capitalism, which condemns some to poverty and others to tedium; in the same way Rabindranath Tagore rejected imperialism, which diminishes the oppressed and the oppressor. Eastern and Western cultures combined in this man who managed the two instruments of English and Bengali; each page of this book is filled with the Asiatic affirmation of the unlimited possibilities of the soul and the mistrust that the state machinery inspired in Spencer.'⁷³

In the same year, 1961, the philosopher Isaiah Berlin

visited India to speak at a conference commemorating Tagore's birth centenary. Berlin chose to speak on the consciousness of one's nationality. He had read some of the poet's non-fiction writings beforehand, though not, ironically, the text called *Nationalism*. The conference proceedings were published without Berlin's essay. It lay among his papers, where, thirty-five years later, it was discovered and prepared for publication by his literary executor. Despite his limited reading, Berlin here displayed a shrewd (and generous) understanding of the poet's moral philosophy. Tagore, he observed, 'tried to tell the complex truth without over-simplification, and to that extent was perhaps listened to the less'. The Englishman saluted the Indian for 'choosing the difficult middle path', resisting the easy options of an enthusiastic embrace of modernity or the uncritical return to tradition. 'Not to give way at a critical point to the temptation of exaggeration—some dramatically extremist doctrine which rivets the eyes of one's countrymen and the world, and brings followers and undying fame and a sense of glory and personal fulfilment', wrote Berlin of Tagore, 'not to yield to this, but to seek to find the truth in the face of scorn and threats from both sides—left and right, Westernisers and traditionalists—that seems to me to be the rarest form of heroism'.⁷⁴

I would like to end this essay with a tribute that Tagore heard in his own lifetime. This was offered by the residents of Rangoon in the last week of March 1924. Tagore had stopped at the Burmese capital en route to China. Five thousand people turned out to hear him speak. In an address presented beforehand, they greeted him in 'the name of that universal culture which you have promoted with admirable devotion

and singleness of aim. We greet you in the name of Human Brotherhood, inculcation of which in East and West has been with you a consuming passion. We greet you as a votary of Truth sensed through Beauty. We greet you as one representing the rebirth of Asia, and as one who had thrown across [a] chasm of ignorance and misunderstanding a bridge of future comprehension between Asia and Euro-America'.⁷⁵

One does not know whether this appreciation nourished Tagore at the time. For the bridge he sought to lay between East and West had been dynamited at the start. He had been accused of being anti-Western by some, of being a colonial agent by others, seen as too much of a patriot by the foreigner and as not patriotic enough by the Indian. He had, we might say, been comprehensively misunderstood by the ignorant. It appears that the residents of Rangoon had anticipated this—why else would they look for a 'future comprehension'? Now, with his words in hand, we might begin to lay that bridge again.⁷⁶

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