International Journal of Social Science and Humanities
www.humanitiesjournals.com
Online ISSN: 2664-8628 Print ISSN: 2664-861X
Received: 07-01-2025, Accepted: 06-02-2025, Published: 21-02-2025
Volume 7, Issue 1, 2025, Page No. 54-56

Rabindranath Tagore's nationalism: A critical analysis and comparison with Gandhi

Zubair Khan
School of Social Sciences, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi, India

Abstract
This paper seeks to explore and explain the unique, and often misunderstood, nationalism of Rabindranath Tagore. Let me be clear from the start: Tagore was not an 'anti-nationalist' in the simple sense. His critique was not of love for one's country, but of the modern Western model of the nation-state, which he saw as a mechanical, aggressive, and soul-crushing machine. This study argues that Tagore's vision was fundamentally different from the political nationalism of his time, including that of Mahatma Gandhi. He envisioned a nationalism rooted in moral universalism, social reform (samaj), and cultural regeneration—a 'home' for the human spirit rather than just a political entity. By tracing his intellectual journey from the Swadeshi Movement to his famous debates with Gandhi on the charkha and non-cooperation, and by engaging with contemporary scholarship, this paper aims to show that Tagore's thought offers a critical, humanistic framework that remains profoundly relevant for questioning the excesses of nationalist fervour in any age.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, nationalism and universalism, nation-state critique, Gandhi–Tagore Debate, cultural humanism

Introduction

Let me begin with the important work of Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, who edited the letters and exchanges in *Mahatma and the Poet*. This collection is vital because it shows us the raw, unfiltered dialogue between two of India's greatest minds [1]. Reading them, you get a sense that their disagreement was not petty; it was a deep, philosophical clash over the very meaning of freedom and the future of India. My focus in this paper is to unpack Tagore's side of this debate. What was his nationalism? Why did it put him at odds with Gandhi, the father of the nation's freedom struggle?

The common perception, which even Tagore noted, was that he was seen as anti-nationalist [2]. But I want to argue that this is a misreading. Tagore was a nationalist, but of a different kind. His nationalism was not centred on capturing state power or defining borders. It was centred on building a worthy society from within. As he famously said, "The problem in India is not political but social [3]." for him, true freedom (swaraj) was the freedom of the mind and conscience, and this could be threatened as much by a tyrannical nation-state as by a colonial government. This paper will explore this idea in detail. First, I will look at Tagore's own writings, especially his 1917 lectures published as **Nationalism**. Then, I will examine his complex relationship with the Swadeshi Movement, which shows his early engagement and subsequent disillusionment with political nationalism. The heart of the paper will be a comparative analysis of his debates with Gandhi on key issues like the charkha, non-cooperation, and the role of the West. Finally, I will conclude by reflecting on why Tagore's cautious, humanistic vision of nationalism still matters today.

Tagore's Conception of Nationalism: Beyond the Political Machine

To understand Tagore, you have to go straight to his book *Nationalism*. Here, he makes a crucial distinction that is the key to his entire thought. He distinguishes between the 'Nation' and 'Society' or 'Samaj'. The Nation, for Tagore, is a political and economic organisation. It is a "scientific" machine, perfected by the West, for the efficient organisation of power and commerce. He describes it in almost terrifying terms: "The national machinery of commerce and politics turns out neatly compressed bales of humanity which have their use and high market value; but they are bound in iron hoops [4]." This machine, he argued, had led Europe to the catastrophe of the First World War. His warning to India was clear: do not imports this model.

\In contrast, 'Society' or 'Samaj' is organic, living, and bound by human relationships, sympathy, and shared culture. It is not based on efficiency or power, but on cooperation and moral bonds. Tagore's nationalism was a call to strengthen this “samaj” from within. This is what he meant by “swadeshi samaj”—the regeneration of one's own society [5]. This project was, first and foremost, a social and ethical one. It involved fighting the internal enemies of India: caste prejudice, superstition, intellectual stagnation, and the blind imitation of both traditional ‘and’Western forms.

For Tagore, therefore, the highest patriotism was not political agitation but social service and cultural creativity. He believed that by solving our social problems and nurturing our creative spirit, we would achieve a freedom more profound than political independence. "I was brought up in the belief that the worship of God and the service of humanity are greater than the worship of the country," he wrote. "I am certain that it will be a gain for humanity to fight against the education which teaches that the country is greater than the ideals of humanity [6]." This statement is the bedrock of his philosophy. His nationalism was subservient to a higher universalism.

Tagore and the Swadeshi Movement

Tagore's ideas did not emerge in a vacuum. They were forged in the fire of the Swadeshi Movement (1905-1908). Initially, like many Bengalis, he was swept up in the fervour. He wrote patriotic songs and gave speeches [7]. Scholars like Sabyasachi Bhattacharya note that in the first

decade of the 20th century, Tagore was a supporter of the anti-colonial nationalism of the Swadeshi era [8]. However, he quickly grew disenchanted. He saw the movement descending into narrow xenophobia, sectarian violence, and terrorist activities. He was alarmed by the way nationalist passion was being used to suppress individual reason and critical thought.

This disillusionment is powerfully captured in his 1916 novel, *'*Ghare-Baire*'* *(*The Home and the World*).* The character of Sandip, the charismatic but fanatical nationalist leader, represents the dangers of a nationalism that becomes an end in itself, justifying coercion and violence [9]. Through this novel, Tagore was working out his own critique of the extremist nationalism he saw around him. His travels to Japan and the United States further solidified his fears. In Japan, he saw a nation that had modernised rapidly by adopting Western nationalist models, but in the process had developed a militant and imperialist spirit [10]. He saw the same destructive potential in the rising nationalist terrorism in Bengal. This series of experiences transformed Tagore from a participant in political nationalism to its most eloquent Indian critic. He began to argue that India's path must be different; it must be based on its own genius for synthesis and moral strength, not on imitation of the West's nation-state model.

Tagore versus Gandhi on the Charkha, Non-Cooperation, and Swaraj

The most famous and fruitful clash of ideas was between Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. They respected each other deeply, but their differences were fundamental. Their debate, carried out in essays, letters, and public statements, highlights the two major strands of Indian anti-colonial thought.

1. On the Charkha and Symbolic Politics:

The most direct clash came in 1925 over Gandhi's emphasis on the spinning wheel, or charkha. For Gandhi, the charkha was a powerful symbol of "swadeshi" (self-reliance), economic resistance, and the dignity of labour. It was a tool for unifying the nation and achieving self-sufficiency [11]. Tagore, however, was deeply sceptical. In his essay "The Cult of the Charkha," he launched a sharp critique. He argued that elevating a single, mechanical activity to a national cult was a dangerous shortcut. It risked "lulling the human mind into a sort of conformity [12]." He feared it would promote unthinking obedience and stifle the intellectual and creative freedom that India desperately needed. For Tagore, poverty was a complex social problem that could not be solved by a symbolic act of spinning. "The mind, like a mill-turning bullock, will be kept going around and round a narrow range of habit," he warned [13]. His concern was that the *charkha* was becoming a test of patriotism, replacing the harder, more necessary work of social and educational reform.

2. On Non-Cooperation and Boycott

Tagore also publicly disagreed with Gandhi's call for non-cooperation and the boycott of British-sponsored schools and colleges in 1920-21. While Gandhi saw this as a vital tactic of moral and political resistance, Tagore saw it as a surrender to what he called "arrogant nationalism [14]." He believed that denying young Indians access to modern education, however flawed the system, was a terrible mistake. For Tagore, the enemy was not Western knowledge itself, but the uncritical imitation of the West and the neglect of one's own culture. His vision for Visva-Bharati University was the opposite of a boycott: it was a "meeting of cultures" where the best of the East and West could converse [15]. He believed that true independence came from the confidence to engage with the world, not from shutting it out.

3. On the Nature of Swaraj (Self-Rule)

This points to their deepest difference: the meaning of 'swaraj'. For Gandhi, political independence from Britain was an essential, non-negotiable step towards true 'swaraj', which he defined as comprehensive self-rule at individual and community levels [16]. His methods—non-cooperation, 'swadeshi', 'satyagraha'—were political tools to achieve this moral and political goal. Tagore, however, consistently separated political freedom from real freedom. He argued that the obsession with political power could lead India to create a state that was just as oppressive as the colonial one, if not more so in its demand for ideological conformity. "When this organization, the nation, becomes all-powerful at the cost of the harmony of the higher social life, then it is an evil day for humanity," he wrote [17]. For Tagore, *swaraj* was the internal condition of intellectual and spiritual liberty, which could be cultivated under any political system and was the only sure foundation for a just society.

Gandhi's Nationalism

To fully appreciate Tagore's position, we must briefly look at Gandhi's. Gandhi's nationalism, outlined in Hind Swaraj (1909), was also a critique of Western civilisation, but it was intensely political and mass-oriented [18]. He rejected modern industrial civilisation as inherently violent and exploitative. His nationalism was based on swadeshi (economic self-reliance), ahimsā (non-violence), and satyagraha (truth-force). Unlike Tagore, Gandhi saw the nation as a collective body that could be morally purified through struggle. He believed a morally disciplined Indian nationalism, focused on self-rule and truth, was not a danger but a gift to humanity [19]. While Tagore worried about the 'charkha' stifling the mind, Gandhi saw it as a tool for economic empowerment and moral discipline. While Tagore feared the boycott of education, Gandhi saw it as a necessary sacrifice for a higher political cause. Their priorities were different: Gandhi's was the liberation of the nation as a political entity; Tagore's was the liberation of the human spirit within the nation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the debate between Tagore and Gandhi was not a clash between a nationalist and an anti-nationalist. It was a clash between two different visions of nationalism and freedom. Gandhi's vision was political, moral, and aimed at mobilising the masses for state power. Tagore's vision was social, cultural, and aimed at building a humane and creative society from within. He feared the idolatry of the nation-state, warning that when the nation becomes a god, its citizens can no longer critique its wrongs [20].

Today, in a world where nationalist politics often manifests as majoritarian assertion, cultural chauvinism, and the suppression of dissent, Tagore's warnings ring with prophetic clarity. He reminds us that the health of a nation is

not measured by its military power or economic output alone, but by the freedom and creativity of its people, by the justice of its social order, and by its commitment to universal human values. He failed to provide a political blueprint, and for that, he is often dismissed as an idealist. But his legacy is not in political strategy. It is in the moral and philosophical standard he bequeathed to us—a standard that challenges us to always ask: does our nationalism build bridges or walls? Does it liberate the human spirit or enslave it to a new idol? In the end, Rabindranath Tagore sought a homeland not just for Indians, but for the very soul of humanity.

References

1. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, ed, Mahatma and the Poet New Delhi: National Book Trust, Introduction, 1997, 2.
2. Rabindranath Tagore, Nationalism, trans. Samitra Mohan Delhi: Rastrya Pustak Nivas, 2016, 48.
3. Ibid., p. 48.
4. Rabindranath Tagore, Nationalism London: Macmillan, 1917, 77.
5. Rinku Lamba, 'Revisiting Rabindranath Tagore's critique of nationalism', Modern Asian Studies,2023:57:1-2.
6. Tagore, Nationalism, trans. Mohan, p. 55.
7. 'Swadeshi movement', Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swadeshi_movement.
8. Bhattacharya, Mahatma and the Poet, Introduction, p. 15.
9. Rabindranath Tagore, Ghare-Baire, The Home and the World, 1916.
10. Bhattacharya, Mahatma and the Poet, p. 23.
11. 'The Cult of the Charkha', Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cult_of_the_Charkha.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Tagore, Nationalism, trans. Mohan, p. 102.
15. Uma Das Gupta, Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, 112.
16. M.K. Gandhi, Hind Swaraj and Other Writings, ed. Anthony J. Parel, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 73.
17. Tagore, Nationalism, 1917, 73.
18. 'Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule', Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hind_Swaraj_or_Indian_Home_Rule.
19. Gandhi, Hind Swaraj, p. 28.
20. Tagore, Nationalism, trans. Mohan, p. 55.