ABSTRACT: Recently, Tan Chung and others brought out a book entitled Tagore and China, which covers a whole range of issues on Tagore’s engagement with China. In the book, Wei Liming (2011) remarks that ‘Tagore’s China visit was truly a wide-ranging Sino-Indian civilizational dialogue, and a very significant landmark in the annals of Sino-Indian cultural intercourse’ (15). Read together with the talks he delivered in China, we are compelled to return to Tagore’s ideas on the nation. For this helps one understand the kind of intellectual he was and the centrality of the idea to his grand tour of China. This paper proposes to draw out in broad terms Tagore’s understanding of the nation with reference to the essays “Nationalism in the West,” “Nationalism in Japan,” “Nationalism in India,” and “The Nation,” and then attempt to read his talks in China in this context. The cue for this endeavour comes from the concluding remark Amartya Sen (2011) makes in his article in the book Tagore and China: “Even as we celebrate Tagore’s 150th anniversary, we can fruitfully engage ourselves in reflecting a little on both Tagore’s basic ideas and the tensions he faced in deciding on what to present to the world” (10). A reading on these lines could perhaps help locate some of the assumptions that seem to have shaped India’s engagement with China after independence.

KEYWORDS: Tagore, nation, nationalism, China, Sino-Indian relations

0. INTRODUCTION

The national anthem of India is a song that solemnly affirms to contemporary Indians that they are all part of a nation. The history behind the composition of the song and its adoption as the national anthem is so well known. The song evokes India in all its plurality and geo-cultural richness. It is useful to recall here that two songs were rendered on December 27, 1911 at the assembly of the Indian National Congress session. The first was Rabindranath Tagore’s ‘Jana Gana Mana’ and the second was Rajbhuja Dutt Chowdhary’s ‘Badshah Humara.’ The second song was composed especially for King George V, who was visiting India at the end of the month. The local newspapers reported that the party session started with a prayer, followed by a resolution expressing
loyalty to the King with another song welcoming the King. However, the English media reported that Tagore’s song was sung in praise of King George V. Certainly, the English media in India were creating a frame facilitating a particular imagining of the subject position for the colonized.

1. RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND THE IDEA OF THE NATION

Rabindranath Tagore was not imagining the Indian nation in the song in the sense in which Benedict Anderson theorized the concept when he wrote about people who imagine the nation as they read newspapers (Anderson 39-40). This has to do with much more than their modes of composition and reception. Anderson’s theorization, even as it elaborates the premise of imagined communities rooted in everyday life offers only a very limited version of the nation willed as an extended function of technology that standardized European languages.

The reference here to the role of newspapers and the extent of imagining communities and nations can shed some light on Tagore’s critique of the idea of the nation and his visit to China. The newspaper assumes significance here because of the common assumption that links the idea of nationalism with printing. Ronald Deibert (1997) has shown how “printing did not generate nationalism” for “its roots can be traced back prior to the development of the printing press into the Middle Ages. However . . . it is unlikely that nationalism would have developed its essential ‘linguistic core’ if printing had not standardized and fixed vernacular languages in early modern Europe” (104). The “embryonic sense of national consciousness” that Deibert traces from far back the Middle Ages through to the 13th century is evidence of a “fermenting national consciousness” (105). He illustrates this with country names such as Polonia, which appeared by 1000, Catalonia in the twelfth century, and rex Franciae in 1204 (105). At best, this was a proto-form of nationalism, and so “lacked the quasi-mythical attachment to a shared language as a ‘natural’ mark of a people and a legitimate basis upon which to differentiate political authority” (105). That is to say, a shared language that describes the nation emerges as a possibility only with
material production. Obviously, this opens up the logic of consumerism, and, in this context, sets the scene to imagine nations based on technological production.

A discussion of the idea of the nation inevitably leads to Herder’s theorizing on the subject. Herder (1800) writes, “For every nation is one people, having its own national form, as well as its own language; the climate, it is true, stamps on each its mark, or spreads over it a slight veil, but not sufficient to destroy the original national character” (166). Richard Wright has admirably summed up Herder’s arguments on nationalism and its basis in a recent study entitled “Herder: On the Ethics of Nationalism.” For the purpose of my argument I wish to focus on Wright’s exposition detailing how

Herder admits the influence of climate, like Montesquieu and others before him, but he argues that a nation is really made one by common traditions, an enduring way of life and a collective memory that is ultimately grounded in a particular language. And the latter is the natural power that integrates people within a particular community and provides the ultimate horizon of all meaning and understanding for them. (Wright 171)

The emphasis here on language is unmistakable for by now it expressed the notion of the Volk. Herder’s theorization of the Volk and nation seems to be shaped by the consolidation of vernaculurs with the emergence of printing; they now become national languages as they are consumed as material of cultural production. Even though Herder “discloses an authentic possibility of nationalism before the triumph of its aggressive forms in the twentieth century,” it is “much harder to view nationalism as an innocent ideal” (172). It remains a fact that the printed word was material enough for the imperial project.

It is against this background that Tagore’s critique of nation and nationalism assumes significance. For instance, he discusses the various cultural encounters in India and settlements that brought with it “the race problem” (419) in the essay “Nationalism in the West.” This draws attention to how he perceived race relations as a continuous mechanism of social adjustments. Social adjustments create social space. For
example, he explains how “we are called as witnesses to give evidence as to what the nation has been to humanity. We had known the hordes of Mughals and Pathans who invaded India, but we had known them as human races, with their own religions and customs, likes and dislikes, – we had never known them as a nation” (421). Therefore, the point that requires emphasis is that “we . . . talked with them in a language which was theirs as well as our own, and guided the destiny of the empire in which we had our active share” (421). In other words, for Tagore, to know a race was not a mechanistic epistemological affair that brought in shared political or economic compulsions.

Tagore perceived the disconnection the West’s idea of nation has with the kind of social living he details in the illustration cited here. The ethical question for him was about the very rationale that functioned as the basis of the machinery of the nation. He recognised this rationale in the colonial imaginings that the newspaper established as the burden nations carry. The nation, then, spoke of a selective language, which could be read and shared only within a consumable shared space. Quite rightly, “the newspapers of England, in whose columns London street accidents are recorded with some decency of pathos, need but take the scantiest notice of calamities happening in India over areas of land sometimes larger than the British isles” (423). This shared space derives its strength from a simultaneity manufactured based on the truth claim of the word in print. This manufacture of truth in clockwork precision offers a mechanistic nation with all its echoes of a contrivance. To adapt Ronald Deibert’s comment on Anderson's discussion of the relationship between printing and nationalism, this would mean that the word is stripped of its divinity (107) in order to stir national imaginings.

Alternatively, it will not be an overstatement to say that for Tagore the moral together with the spiritual is the path forward to realize the aspirations of the social. In the words of Mohit K. Ray, “Tagore’s main objection to nationalism is that it was modelled on certain utilitarian objectives with an overemphasis on commercial and political aspects at the cost of moral and spiritual aspects of man” (244). The humanist in Tagore believed in the potential for perfection in man and utilitarianism was certainly a threat. According to him, the singular thread spinning out from this burden expressed itself in the politics of colonization. No
wonder then, that Tagore offers a trenchant critique of the nation. He observes that the nation “is the least human and the least spiritual” (“Nationalism in the West” 423); for him it is an “epidemic of evil” that sweeps across the world “eating into its moral vitality” (424). It is this canker at the heart of nationalism, diseased, and the failure to realize that “those people who have got political freedom are not necessarily free” (“Nationalism in India” 462) that sets the tone of his critique of nation. He recognized that “From nationalism to colonialism is just one step forward” (Ray 244). In this sense, he does not carry the West as a burden that one cannot shake off, nor does he create an East/West binary where there is a perennial need to bash up the West.

In “Nationalism in India” Tagore shows how the “nationalists talk about ideals,” but they “forget that the basis of nationalism is wanting” (463). It sounds good to be idealistic but he rips off this mask in the same essay to show that those preaching ideals are a conservative lot. Tagore squarely identifies India’s problems as essentially social, and then makes a crucial comment that certainly merits critical attention. He writes:

And when we talk of Western Nationality we forget that the nations there do not have physical repulsion, one for the other, that we have between different castes. Have we an instance in the whole world where a people who are not allowed to mingle their blood shed their blood for one another except by coercion or for mercenary purposes? And can we ever hope that these moral barriers against our race amalgamation will not stand in the way of our political unity? (463).

Such an observation was in all probability politically incorrect and this is perhaps where we recognize the radical in him. For example, one need only recall here the differences on the issue of caste between Gandhi and Tagore. While Gandhi distinguished between varna and caste, Tagore felt that both were equally responsible for the social backwardness and limits on freedom. Evidently, what he raises here is an ethical problem with which we continue to grapple.

In other words, Tagore urges us to examine the rationale of his critique, which is grounded in the social and ethical reality of his times. It is not
a simple case of siding with the West or even a simple formulaic repetition of the East meets West slogan. It is Tagore’s rootedness in the morality of his geo-ethics speaking particularly in his engagements with Asian countries. Consider, for instance, a sentence from his “Nationalism in Japan”: “In a word modern Japan has come out of the immemorial East like a lotus blossoming in easy grace, all the while keeping its firm hold upon the profound depth from which it had sprung” (437). Tagore was well aware of the dangers that Japan confronted (445) here and elsewhere (“To my Hosts” 598), and calls for a freedom of the mind that is the cornerstone of his ethics of being a people. No wonder, the spirit of a free mind captures his sense of modernism. His discussion of modernism outlines exactly this when he writes in “Nationalism in Japan” that “certainly modernism is not in their ladies’ bonnets, carrying on them loads of incongruities. These are not modern, but merely European. True modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste. It is independence of thought and action, not tutelage under European school-masters” (446).

To return to the song mentioned at the beginning of the paper, it celebrates an ethical freedom that imagines and salutes not so much places but the idea of being a people. What Tagore endeavoured to adumbrate in his critique of nationalism was precisely this ethical freedom, which did form the burden of his lectures, particularly in China.

2. TAGORE AND CHINA

What does it mean to be a people? In his “First Talk at Shanghai,” Tagore said towards the end of his lecture, “When you have succeeded in recalling all the great things achieved in spite of insuperable difficulties, I hope that some great dreamer will spring from among you and preach a message of love and, therewith overcoming all differences, bridge the chasm of passions which has been widening for ages” (642). In her foreword to the Chinese edition of the book Tagore and China, Nirupama Rao has cited the same lines, and in her foreword to the Indian edition drawn attention to “Tagore and his belief in the geo-civilizational paradigm of India-China relations” (xii-xiii, xvi). Obviously, spiritual and geo-political concerns appear to be incompatible. It is, however, Tagore’s moral vision for humanity that provides the conceptual
framework to engage with these apparent incompatibilities. Perhaps it is not off the mark to posit that Tagore’s sojourn in China and his interactions there did highlight his understanding of what it means to be a people. Diplomacy, one assumes, has to do with such recognition. While Tagore dreams of bridging the chasm of passions, Rao lays emphasis on the Asian focus in Tagore, compressing his thoughts in that single phrase she uses to describe bilateral relations.

One can read much of Tagore’s talks in China in 1924 as a response to the query that opened this section. Amartya Sen (2011) remarks that the visit “generated considerable disapproval and reproach from a substantial number of Chinese intellectuals” (3). In “Telepathy between Rubidadda and Susima,” Tan Chung discusses the cultural debate that was raging in China when Tagore made his visit (113-114). Amartya Sen’s account of the cultural climate in China during the visit draws attention precisely to the kind of issues that ancient civilizations had in attempting to have a dialogue between tradition and the here and now of the modern world. Instead of a dialogue, there were only discordant voices and radical demands to modernize; even the Communist Party toed the line of the youth who were spearheading this campaign. According to Sen, “By the time Tagore came to China, among the debates that animated China was that between those focusing on China’s traditional culture and the new activists concerned deeply with changing the modern world, rather than remaining focused on the past” (4).

The question is, as Amiya Dev (2011) puts it in “Tagore’s vision of the East,”

Was he at all [a controversial guest], or was it a mere misapprehension on the part of the post-May Fourth modernists? For there is no denying that he left an impact, more perhaps than in many other countries. . . . True he spoke against crass materialism, but not without praise for China’s ethical regard over ages for material existence, that has never been inhospitable for others. His target was self-centred commercialism, the kind he saw in Shanghai, the kind that existed in his native Calcutta. (174)

1 Also see Tagore’s “To Students” 607
If Tagore’s Chinese visit sparked debates, it goes on to reveal a mind that was open to dialogue and thought. What requires greater emphasis is the impact he left behind, indicating the importance he gave to the unfettered imaginative mind that could engage with diverse peoples and cultures.

Tagore’s presence and lectures in China, in the context of his critique of self-centred commercialism did emphasize his political outlook, and this possibly elicited the protests by the post-May Fourth modernists. In China, he spelt out his critique of the newspapers, which were reduced to the mechanical production of opinions. A reading of the protests helps to revisit and consolidate Tagore’s critiques with reference to the role of newspapers and the extent to which newspapers help imagine communities. In “Leave Taking,” he declares, “We have to wait on the reports in the newspapers, so representative of the whole machinery which has been growing up all over the world for the creation of misunderstanding, and for the making of life superficial” (617). We have to understand Tagore’s concerns in the context of the attitude of the press to his visit.

Swapan Majumdar (2011) points out that scholars have not paid much attention to the “hue and cry regarding Tagore’s alleged denunciation of Western industrial civilization,” an issue which was “raised not by the Young Turks of China, but by a section of the British press” (81). Majumdar’s detailing of the inside story of the report is illuminating: “The Peking Leader of 24 April 1924 not only carried a related editorial but also a letter to the editor under the signature of a ‘Westerner.’ Distinguishing between Western ‘work’ and science and Eastern ‘sloth’ and ignorance, the latter remonstrated, ‘[M]ight not Tagore spend some time in warning peoples of Asia of the demoralizing influence of sloth and of the disregard of their own resources?’” (81). Obviously, the ‘Westerner’ assumes that the East does not have a work ethic; the readers of the paper would have obviously imagined this nation, much like in Anderson’s description. The nation is also imagined differently as an assembly line product if one goes by another report which Tagore cites in his opening lecture.
His opening remarks made in China, presented in the essay titled “Autobiographical” sum up in more ways than one how we have endeavoured to understand him: “Lately I read an observation in one of your papers that, being a philosopher, I was half an hour late in attending a particular meeting. . . . I suppose that what gave him [the writer] more serious concern was that according to him I was altogether out of date in this modern age, that I ought to have been born 2000 years ago when poets dreamed over their brimming wine-cups in the moonlight, and philosophers ignored everything immediate, time and space” (581). Amiya Dev rightly sums up the irony to which Tagore referred in his lecture when he writes that he has been often taken to be “an apostle of the east” while abroad and its opposite back home (171). In his “Leave Taking,” Tagore says, “Some of your patriots were afraid that, carrying from India spiritual contagion, I might weaken your vigorous faith in money and materialism” (620).

It is hard to miss the tone and intent in the use of Tagore’s expression ‘spiritual contagion.’ In fact, he writes about this contagion in unambiguous terms in “To My Hosts”: “It is cooperation and love, mutual trust and mutual aid which makes for strength and real progress in civilization” (601). This spirit of inclusiveness is what makes for being a people. He did not call for freedom from the clutches of a nation, but was concerned with a moral vision relating to “a spiritual perfection of life” (598). The mutuality to which he refers is the bedrock on which Tagore erects his spiritual perfection of life. For this reason, the boundaries in place in the name of progress were not the way forward for “others are left outside its boundaries” (599). Tan Chung emphasizes in “Towards an In-depth Understanding” that “Tagore never thought of any national boundary, let alone barrier, between India and China” (187). Quite naturally then, if there was one thing that he emphasized in his visit to China, it was the strength of coming together in brotherhood. His legacy for India-China relations in particular and for international relations lies precisely in this ‘spiritual contagion’ for which he set up Cheena Bhavana in Shantiniketan.

Contrary to the reading the newspapers offered of his visit, Wei Liming concludes, “Tagore’s China visit was truly a wide-ranging Sino-Indian civilizational dialogue, and a very significant landmark in the annals of
Sino-Indian cultural intercourse” (15). And yet, post independence, India has not been able to forge a sustained friendly relationship with China ever since the 1962 aggression. There could be many reasons for this. The way China grew after the Cultural Revolution with its own kind of communism and its strategic geographical location in Asia is certainly a factor with which India has had to contend. The question we have to reckon with has to do with how the culture of geo-politics has evolved in describing relations between China and other nations in the Indian subcontinent. In this context, the question is to ask whether the faith that Tagore had, expressed in “To my Hosts” during his visit about “overcoming all differences, bridg[ing] all the chasm of passions which has been widening for ages (595) has become an impossibility. In fact, one can trace the origin of the territorial battle to the continuation of the colonial enterprise of drawing and redrawing boundaries and the narrative of maps which the British administration generated. The question is whether we have tried to see the connection between the nationalist aspirations behind, say, the Line of Control that defines India’s borders and colonisation. The conflict and subsequent engagements with Pakistan seem to have calcified human relations. Perhaps what Tagore anticipated as a difficulty “because civilization has produced shells which we carry around with us” (596) has solidified especially in relation to the border flare-ups, and the Dalai Lama.

3. CONCLUSION

Tagore was not a diplomat in the sense in which the word is used today and did not believe that diplomacy solved problems (601); yet he affirmed his faith in India and China “[re-opening here] the channel of communion,” which he hoped was “still there: for though overgrown with weeds of oblivion its lines can still be traced” (597). He recognized that good fences make good neighbours. One can only agree with Tan Chung’s observation in “Towards an In-depth Understanding of Tagore, China and Asia” that, “Tagore was, perhaps, the first person on record in modern times to be defining India and China as ‘brother-states,’ and he was certainly the inspiration behind ‘Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai,’ the exciting, though ephemeral, slogan of the 1950s, when the two countries were in
their honeymoon period” (188). But then, it does not help much in stopping with the honeymoon. The Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet region of China and India signed in April 1954 and the too quick Indian action of giving up her extra-territorial rights in Tibet was a failure to understand the strategist Zhou En Lai. Since China took extra care of its own interests, this agreement, known also as Panchsheel became a casualty with the 1962 aggression. The core issue of trying to create “an era of warm kinship’ between India and China” (193) continues to elude us even as there are diplomatic exercises on this front.

One main reason for this could very well be the deep roots nationalism took in the post-war world and as Tagore notes in “To Students,” the way in which industrialization has left in its wake “brute powers of militarism” (607), new forms of competitiveness, global capitalism, identity formations, and pressures on natural resources with aggressive notions of progress and development. The worst fears that engaged Tagore’s critical mind played out in the twentieth century and well into the twenty-first. He speaks to us today because he engaged with the outlook of his own people and that of neighbours. One can only agree with Sachidananda Mohanty’s argument that Tagore found some answers to grave issues of his times. Mohanty draws attention to this visionary’s faith in cultural contacts in the realm of physical voyages and those of the mind (81). If Tagore’s vision outlined in “Leave Taking” of a “bond of unity between nations” (615) or his belief that “All real union consists of a binding of two hearts” (616) should continue to speak, a lot more needs to be done. This is a call to steer away from the kind of tokenism that might otherwise befall the unveiling of his huge bronze statue in Shanghai in May 2010. That will be one small way we can meaningfully remember what Tagore did for Sino-India relations. Tagore had a deep conviction to act in good faith and be in communion with fellow beings. This gave shape to the kind of filial love he championed in his visit to China. For this reason, it stands out as much more than a model. The least we can do is to imbibe something of Tagore’s conviction and faith in fellowship when he embarked on his Chinese pilgrimage.
REFERENCES


**Dr B. Hariharan** is Professor at the Institute of English, University of Kerala. He is also the Director, UGC Area Study Centre for Canadian Studies, University of Kerala. He is the author of the book *The Carnival World of Robert Kroetsch*, and has translated three books from Malayalam to English. He has also co-edited four books and also did a major research project on Kerala’s Public Spaces.

**Dr B. Hariharan**
harirang@gmail.com