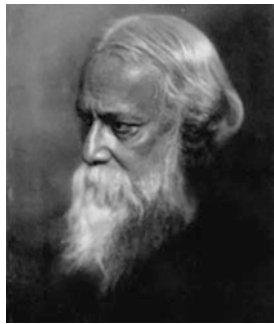


# Rabindranath Tagore *Nationalism* (1917)



Yoshihiro Ohsawa



Rabindranath Tagore.

(Source: *25 portraits of Rabindranath Tagore*, Visva-Bharati, Calcutta, 1951)

Rabindranath Tagore was born in Calcutta, West Bengal in 1861. His father, Debendranath Tagore, was a religious man who was devoted to the Reformation movement. The Tagore family was a distinguished family that included many artists and thinkers. The eminent scholar, Okakura Kakuzō, visited the Tagore family and was inspired by them. In 1901, Tagore opened a boarding school (later to be named Tagore International University) in Shantiniketan, where he was to base his activities from then on. After receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 for the English translation of his collection of poems entitled *Gitanjali*, he became internationally renowned and he interacted extensively with Western intellectuals such as Romain

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Yoshihiro Ohsawa passed away before the publication of this English language edition.

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Rolland. Tagore visited Japan five times, beginning with his first visit in 1916. He became increasingly critical of Japan, and his arguments with Noguchi Yonejirō regarding the Sino-Japanese War are particularly famous. Although Tagore himself was a non-political person, he was bound to get involved in the political controversies of the times, and is known to have once disagreed with Gandhi on the Indian independence movement. His true genius, however, was poetry. His poems in his native language, Bengali, are considered classics of modern Indian literature (many of which he himself translated into English). He also wrote plays, short stories, and long novels such as *Gora*. Tagore had a strong interest in painting too. He himself often painted and he often received Japanese artists as visitors at Shantiniketan. Tagore died in 1941.

In 1913 (Taishō 2), Tagore became the first Asian in history to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. The honor was enjoyed not only by Tagore, but also served to heal the inferiority complex of Asians at the time, including the Japanese.

Tagore was invited to Japan after receiving the Nobel Prize, but did not visit the country until 3 years later, in 1916. He arrived in Kobe on May 29 of that year. He gave a lecture in Osaka on June 1, then went to Tokyo on June 5 where he first stayed with Yokoyama Taikan, an acquaintance of his. The lectures in Tokyo, “The Message of India to Japan” (Tokyo Imperial University, June 11, 1916) and “The Spirit of Japan” (Keio University, July 2, 1916) were incorporated the following year into Chapter II “Nationalism in Japan” of the book. The other chapters are Chapter I, “Nationalism in the West,” and Chapter III, “Nationalism in India.”

As the chapter titles suggest, the book discusses the situation in the West, Japan, and India with respect to the growth of nationalism. Tagore’s concern, however, was not political. What he addresses in the book are the cultural transitions and conditions in the three cases as he sees them.

What, then, does he have to say about Japan?

Tagore begins by describing how instrumental Japan was for the Asia’s Awakening. He writes, “One morning the whole world looked up in surprise when Japan broke through her walls of old habits in a night and came out triumphant. It was done in such an incredibly short time that it seemed like a change of dress and not like the building up of a new structure. [. . .] This it is which has given heart to the rest of Asia. We have seen that the life and the strength are there in us, only the dead crust has to be removed.” Here, Tagore seems to be referring to Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese War which had a strong impact on Asian nations, as Tagore acknowledges elsewhere.

However, Tagore believes that Japan’s victory could not have been produced merely by its imitation of Western material civilization. He says, “I, for myself, cannot believe that Japan has become what she is by imitating the West. We cannot imitate life, we cannot simulate strength for long, nay, what is more, a mere imitation is a source of weakness.”

Tagore valued the power of the soul above all else. He says that no matter how powerful Western civilization may seem, uncritical assimilation of it, to the point of losing one’s soul, is a weakening of the self. If Western civilization has an evil aspect, which he believes it does, the dangers will be great. He says, “Europe is

supremely good in her beneficence where her face is turned to all humanity; and Europe is supremely evil in her maleficent aspect where her face is turned only upon her own interest, using all her power of greatness for ends which are against the infinite and the eternal in Man.” Tagore felt that even if, for a time, one gains material power through the introduction of Western civilization, if one’s soul is depleted and one loses spiritual power as a result, what is important is the latter, not the former.

Of course, such thinking was surprisingly far removed from the prevailing views of the time, and many people did not understand what he was saying, with some even criticizing him vehemently. Since Chapter II of *Nationalism* was written first, the criticism he received in Japan is mentioned in Chapter I, “Nationalism in the West.” Critics said that his ideas, though poetic, were defeatist. The same was true in the U.S., where he visited afterwards to give a lecture. According to Krishna Kripalani, who wrote Tagore’s biography, he was even criticized for trying to deceive American youth.

Tagore was a fierce critic of the shortcomings of Western civilization, but this does not mean that he did not recognize its virtues. He recognized that even Western materialist civilization had some value, as long as one did not get caught up in it. He was also well aware of the existence of a deep spiritual culture at the base of Western civilization. He writes, “In the heart of Europe runs the purest stream of human love, of love of justice, of spirit of self-sacrifice for higher ideals. The Christian culture of centuries has sunk deep in her life’s core.”

Tagore believed that if non-Western nations overlooked the deep spirituality of the West and focused their attention solely on material wealth, national power, and military might, it would lead to unfortunate consequences for humanity. However, despite his advice, the current of the times was moving rather swiftly in the direction of parochial nationalism. Tagore’s initial hopes for Japan, he felt, had grown to a level of overconfidence after its victory in the Russo-Japanese War. He writes, “What is dangerous for Japan is, not the imitation of the outer features of the West, but the acceptance of the motive force of the Western nationalism as her own. Her social ideals are already showing signs of defeat at the hands of politics. I can see her motto, taken from science, ‘Survival of the Fittest,’ writ large at the entrance of her present-day history—the motto whose meaning is, ‘Help yourself, and never heed what it costs to others.’”

Of course, it would be an exaggeration to say that non-Western evils were brought about solely by the West, for Eastern societies had not been free of contradictions. Tagore was well aware of this. For example, he criticizes the caste system in his native India. Its contradictions were not brought about by the modern West. For Tagore, however, the biggest problem facing the world today was how to stay out of the movement of nationalism created by Western civilization. Japan, however, was already caught up in it, and India was about to be caught up in it. Tagore’s immediate task was to criticize and curb this trend. He was condemned in both Japan and the United States for criticizing the nationalist movement. In fact, even in India, most people did not support his arguments.

It is not surprising that his views on these issues were difficult to understand, especially for the Japanese people of that time. Even the Japanese newspapers, which at first gave Tagore's visit to Japan a great deal of publicity, gradually began to give him a cold reception. When Tagore left Japan for the United States, only a few people saw him off. The change was extreme.

As time passes and we read his words again today, after two world wars, few would be willing to endow nationalism with absolute value or be unaware of its destructive aspects. In this respect, Tagore was ahead of many. He was also undoubtedly unique in his discussion of the trends of modern civilization, focusing on the three poles of the West, Japan, and India, and attempting to clarify the situation and characteristics of each.

However, it is also true that Tagore's words are still difficult for the Japanese to understand. There are many logical leaps in his writings. The Edo period thinker Tominaga Nakamoto (1715–1746) once said in his book *The Writings of an Old Man* (Okina no fumi), “The tendency peculiar to Buddhism is magic, which is now called sorcery. Indian people like it. In preaching a Way, or in teaching people, if a good dose of magic is not mixed, people would not believe and follow.” (*Nihon no meicho*, vol. 18, Chūōkōronsha, 1972, p. 69; English translation by Katō, Shūichi, “Okina no fumi: The Writings of an Old Man,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 22, nos. 1–2 [1967]: p. 207.) There is a strong inclination of this in Tagore. Many who speak of India are fascinated by its “magic.” I believe that knowing about India is very useful for knowing about Japan. To do so, we must first dodge their “magic” and get closer to the reality of Tagore and India.

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