

Tagore and Anderson's Idea of Nation: A Comparative Study

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Abstract:

This article tends to uphold both Tagore and Anderson's idea of nation and will try exploring the area where both their ideas resemble and differ from each other. With 'Post colonialism', many eminent scholars, theoreticians working in the field have tried to define nation from different perspectives. They have tried to uphold their own understanding of nation and at the same time have intended to show how a nation forms. Tagore and Benedict Anderson are among those theoreticians of the twentieth century who quested to trace out a concrete idea of a nation from their own point of views. Though it is also true that even before the eminent literary theorists like Benedict Anderson probed into this problem of defining 'nation' and theorizing it in the literary contexts, Tagore has already expressed his own perception of nation and its derivative nationalism.

Key words: Nation, Nation State, Nationalism, Community, Ideology

Introduction

With the advancement of the literary theory called 'Post colonialism', many eminent scholars, theoreticians working in the field have tried to define nation from different perspectives. They have tried to uphold their own understanding of nation and at the same time have intended to show how a nation

forms. Tagore and Benedict Anderson are among those theoreticians of the twentieth century who quested to trace out a concrete idea of a nation from their own point of views. Though it is also true that even before the eminent literary theorists like Benedict Anderson probed into this problem of defining 'nation' and theorizing it in the literary contexts, Tagore has already expressed his own perception of nation and its derivative nationalism. This article tends to uphold both Tagore and Anderson's idea of nation and will try exploring the area where both their ideas resemble and differ from each other.

Tagore's Idea of Nation

In the essay *Nationalism in The West* Tagore writes-

A nation, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose. Society as such has no ulterior purpose. It is an end in itself. It is a spontaneous self-expression of man as a social being. It is a natural regulation of human relationships, so that men can develop ideals of life in cooperation with one another. It has also a political side, but this is only for a special purpose. It is for self-preservation. It is merely the side of power, not of human ideals. And in the early days it had its separate place in society, restricted to the professionals. But when with the help of science and the perfecting of organization this power begins to grow and brings in harvests of wealth, then it crosses its boundaries with amazing rapidity. For then it goads all its neighbouring societies with greed of material prosperity, and consequent mutual jealousy, and by the fear of each other's growth into powerfulness. The time comes when it can stop no longer, for the competition grows keener, organization grows vaster, and selfishness attains supremacy. Trading upon the greed and fear of man, it occupies more and more space in society, and at last becomes its ruling force. (page 20, Tagore)

In Tagore's view nation is 'a great menace'. He further adds by saying that he was 'not against one nation in particular, but against the general idea of all nations'. According to him, the nation is both immoral and amoral in nature, which 'will never heed the voice of truth and goodness.' As one scholar upholds the point that when Tagore "says that 'in the reign of the nation the governed are pursued by suspicions' his experience is primarily that of the repression of the colonial state; even though 'it is not a question of the British government, but of government by the nation', he nevertheless acknowledges: 'our only intimate experience of the nation is the British nation'. But, '[this] government by the nation is neither British nor anything else; it is an applied science and therefore more or less similar in principles wherever it is used.' However thus far, the paradox of the nation and the no-nation remains unresolved. The paradox can be perhaps explicated by looking at what Amartya Sen called 'Tagore's dual attitude to Nationalism', and recognising the open texture of nationalism as well." (page 376, Mukherji)

In an article entitled as *Rabindranath Tagore and Nationalism: An Interpretation* Michael Collins writes- "Tagore gives one of his clearer statements. A nation, he says, is understood 'in the sense of the political and economic union of a people' and is 'that aspect which a whole population assumes when organised for a mechanical purpose'. Immediately we get a sense of Tagore's strategic use of the term. For Tagore, a nation cannot be equated with ethnic, or straightforwardly with a cultural or linguistic group. It may have been born out of – and still comprise – such phenomena, but for Tagore the nation is distinctively modern and exclusively Western. Its „mechanical purpose implicates an instrumental rationality in its political organizational form. The nation is a force that is greater than the sum of its parts: it has a purpose, and this purposeful element is reified in the form of the state. Therefore, in Tagore's critique, the nation is always the nation-state."(Page 4, Collins)

In short, “it is a spontaneous self-expression of man as a social being. It is a natural regulation of human relationships, so that men can develop ideals of life in cooperation with one another”. Tagore has tried to alter the definition of a nation by analysing it from the perspective of ‘*swadeshi sama*’, according to nation is place that maintains the “*social relations that are not mechanical and impersonal but based on love and cooperation*”. In Tagore’s opinion modern western nation “*seeks to exercise power by regulating its populace and directing their collective energies towards externally oriented goals. The nation-state, for Tagore, is an organising system and a structure of power.*” This “*hardening method of national efficiency gains in strength, and at least for some limited period of time it proudly proves itself to be the fittest to survive*”.

The second contrast that can be traced in Tagore is the concept utilized by Tagore to draw his distinctions between the activities of the nation-state and the life-world of society is “politics”. As E. P. Thompson rightly upholds the fact that Tagore was founder as well as the true believer of the concept of “anti-politics”, who “more than any other thinker of this time, had a clear conception of civil society, as something distinct from Land of stronger and more personal texture than political or economic structures.”

Tagore opines that a nation can be understood “*in the sense of the political and economic union of a people*” and is “*that aspect which a whole population assumes when organised for a mechanical purpose*”. In Tagore’s view ethnicity and nation are two different terms and cannot be equated straightforwardly with a cultural or linguistic group. It may have been born out of such phenomena, but for Tagore the “nation is distinctively modern and exclusively Western. Its mechanical purpose implicates an instrumental rationality in its political organisational form. The nation is a force that is greater than the sum of its parts: it has a purpose, and this purposeful element is reified in the form of the state. Therefore, in Tagore’s critique, the nation is always the ‘nation-state’.”

Tagore concludes by saying that language, material interests, religious unity or geographical boundary – none of these have been an essential condition for the making of the western nation. For Tagore, nation is a mental construct. Though he does not deny the fact that an individual's psychology does play a significant role in forming the idea of a nation, he does not even hesitate to say that the idea of nation in the west is different from the idea of society in Indian history. According to him, the society or community reigns supreme in India.

Three years later in a seminal paper called “Swadeshi Samaj” (1904), or the “Self-sufficient Society” Tagore raises very important issues. He says that in the history of the western civilization, life of the people has always been controlled by the state power, as in ancient Greece and Rome and also in the modern European societies. But in the Orient, in China and India, for example, society and not state, has been the determining agency. Secondly, Tagore emphatically asserts that the village in ancient India was not merely a place where people lived. It was also the centre of the basic values of Indian culture. It achieved almost a total self-reliance in all its basic needs – health, food, education, recreation and creativity. The village in India could thus function independently, without any help from the state. This is the village we have lost. Thirdly, Tagore argues that the genius of the Indian civilization embedded in the community life of the village lies in “its ability to harmonize the disparate”.

Anderson's Idea of Nation

Anderson in his *Imagined Community* has defined nation as psychological notion that plays a significant role in alliancing the people, with various occupations and cultures, within a particular territory. It as if an imaginative string that unites community. In other words Anderson's vision of Nation and community are synonymous because he believes that is the

community that forms the nation and it is at the same time it is also idea of nation that makes the community a unified entity.

Anderson's understanding is synonymous with the Marxist concept of ideology. It is an ideology because it acts as a powerful instrument to alliance the people within a particular country. He advances the idea that nations are not natural entities but narrative constructs. He argues that modern nationalism is basically a consequence of the convergence of capitalism, print technology and the fixity that resulted from print extending to vernacular language. On the cultural front he argues that pre-national culture was a religious culture and nation replaced this religious culture with its own uniquely constructed national culture.

Anderson defines Nation as -"An imagined political community –imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." It is imagined because the members of the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, yet in their minds of each lives the image of their communion. It is imagined as sovereign because the concept of nation was born in an age in which enlightenment and revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinity and finally it is imagined as a community because "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings".(page 8, Anderson)

A comparative Reading

According to Anderson, language is the main ingredient in the mixture that glues a "nation" together and creates group consciousness. It is language that tells history, evokes images and produces social cohesion. We should not underemphasize the importance Anderson assigns to "imagining." It is this

imagining through language that helps “create” symbols, history and values that make a community of any size appear real. Anderson further elaborates on the birth of nations by illustrating how it became necessary due to the dissolution of authority of three ancient entities- religious communities, dynastic realms and conception of “temporality in which cosmology and history were indistinguishable”.

Anderson's understanding of nation resembles with that of Tagore's idea of nation because both of them gives a high emphasis on the psychological aspect of an individual in the forming of a nation. Anderson has argued that the idea of the nation is somewhat a mental creation, an imaginative space that every individual does possess. In his opinion nation is an imaginative political community. Similarly Tagore has argued that it is an individual's psychology that does play a significant role in constructing the idea of a nation. Though here it is noteworthy to mention that whereas Tagore argues that neither language nor the geographical boundary has been the essential condition for the making of a nation, Anderson says that language is the main ingredient in the mixture that glues a “nation” together and creates group consciousness. In other words, whereas Tagore upholds his view that it is not the language or the boundary rather it is the psychology of every individual that forms the notion of a nation, Anderson advances with the idea that the language is one of the major ingredients that plays a vital role in constructing the idea of nation,. Probably the logic that enabled Tagore to develop his own theory of nation was the understanding of his own nation India. Despite having so many diversities in terms of language, culture, race and religion India as a nation is still able to maintain unity in diversity. That is the reason why Tagore, while watching the strength of unity of India, did not hesitate to write-

“Hey mor chitto, punya tirtho Jago re dhire-
Ei Bharater mahamanaber Sagartire...”
[O my spirit, in sacred pilgrimage

Awake! Arise! In steady calm-
Around this shore of India's great men]

Translation by Shamik Bose

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