



Rabindranath Tagore's concept of Swadeshi Samaj and Hindu Muslim Relations

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore, the illustrious Bengali poet, philosopher, and polymath, had profound ideas on various social issues, including Swadeshi Samaj and Hindu-Muslim relations. His thoughts in these areas were nuanced and often diverged from the mainstream nationalist discourse of his time. The term "Swadeshi" generally refers to a movement aimed at promoting Indian goods and self-reliance, originally against the British colonial rule. However, Tagore's conception of Swadeshi Samaj went beyond mere economic self-sufficiency. Tagore emphasized the need for India to develop its own cultural and ethical identity. He believed that true swadeshi was not just about rejecting foreign goods but about fostering a spirit of self-reliance, creativity, and ethical values that were rooted in India's cultural heritage. Tagore's idea of Swadeshi was inclusive. He advocated for a society that embraced diversity and promoted the welfare of all its members, irrespective of caste, creed, or religion. He envisioned a society where the spiritual and cultural richness of India could flourish through mutual respect and cooperation among its diverse communities. Tagore was critical of the aggressive and exclusionary tactics adopted by some proponents of the Swadeshi movement. He believed that such methods could lead to social fragmentation and violence. Instead, he advocated for a peaceful and constructive approach to achieving self-reliance. Tagore's views on Hindu-Muslim relations were deeply influenced by his humanistic philosophy and his commitment to social harmony. Tagore strongly believed in the idea of unity in diversity. He felt that the harmonious coexistence of different religious communities was essential for the social and cultural vitality of India. He opposed any form of communalism that sought to divide people along religious lines. Tagore promoted dialogue and understanding between Hindus and Muslims. He believed that through open communication and mutual respect, the two communities could address their differences and work together for the common good. Tagore saw education as a crucial tool for fostering communal harmony. He founded the Visva-Bharati University with the vision of creating an environment where people from different cultural and religious backgrounds could learn and grow together. Through education, he aimed to break down prejudices and build a sense of shared identity among Indians. Tagore was critical of religious orthodoxy and dogmatism, which he felt were often at the root of communal tensions. He advocated for a more enlightened and compassionate understanding of religion that emphasized common human values over rigid doctrinal differences. Rabindranath Tagore's concepts of Swadeshi Samaj and Hindu-Muslim relations were grounded in his broader philosophy of humanism and universalism. He envisioned an inclusive, ethical, and culturally rich Indian society where different communities could live in harmony. Tagore's thoughts continue to be relevant in contemporary discussions on national identity, cultural diversity, and communal harmony in India.

Keywords: Swadeshi Samaj; Humanism; Universalism; Communal Harmony.

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Introduction

One can never account for the emergence of a genius, for genius is always something in the nature of an exception to the general rule.⁽¹⁾ In fact, one is not sure when the Bengalis will stop telling fellow Bengalis and the world that Rabindranath Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1913 and that he got the award for his own translation of his poems, published in a collection called the *Gitanjali*. Such introduction, now repeated for nearly 100 years, only reflects the stagnation and sterility of knowledge and scholarship in this part of the world.⁽²⁾ A multi-faceted genius, Rabindranath Tagore was the fourteenth child of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore and Sarada Devi. Little did they know then that the child would be the brightest gem of their family. Devendranath Tagore himself was a deeply religious and a remarkable personality who had a profound influence on the intellectual development of Rabindranath.⁽³⁾ Viswakavi Rabindranath was born on May 9, 1861 in Bengal. Rabindranath Tagore was not sent to any school. He was educated at home by a tutor.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was the youngest son of Debendranath Tagore, a leader of the Brahmo Samaj, which was a new religious sect in nineteenth-century Bengal and which attempted a revival of the ultimate monistic basis of Hinduism as laid down in the *Upanishads*. He was educated at home; and although at seventeen he was sent to England for formal schooling, he did not finish his studies there. In his mature years, in addition to his many-sided literary activities, he managed the family estates, a project which brought him into close touch with common humanity and increased his interest in social reforms. He also started an experimental school at Shantiniketan where he tried his Upanishadic ideals of education. From time to time he participated in the Indian nationalist movement, though in his own non-sentimental and visionary way; and Gandhi, the political father of modern India, was his devoted friend. Tagore was knighted by the ruling British Government in 1915, but within a few years he resigned the honour as a protest against British policies in India.⁽⁴⁾

Rabindranath Tagore was born in the post-Mutiny period of stress and strain. On the one hand, the liberal tradition in English education and English political history took root in India, and the flood-gates of European liberalism were thrown open in our land of orthodoxy by the driving force of Raja Rammohan Roy.⁽⁵⁾ Tagore was nursed in the tradition bequeathed by Raja Rammohan Roy; he had the political ideas of his father, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore.⁽⁶⁾ Indeed in this increasingly globalising society when the uncertainties ruled by conflicts, race, class and gender continue, and especially because the security of basic human rights is still in jeopardy, it is important to engage our understanding with Tagore's legacy into the global arena in the context of today's world. Even if he is not considered as a social thinker, which he was, far ahead of his times, he is a social thinker relevant for all times.⁽⁷⁾ Tagore was a man not only belonging to the world of creativity but also to the political world. The great poet took much care throughout the 19th century and participated in the ongoing social, political and cultural debate affecting the society. Tagore was always guided by truthfulness and aesthetic beauty and always ran after unity among diversity. Tagore's educational, social, economic and political beliefs were all coloured by his deep religious faith. "Tagore had a vision of reality in which the supreme values were those of truth, beauty and goodness. He pleaded for co-operation and not competition between different nations and different ideals, for according to him, interdependence and not independence can alone solve the problem of the modern age".⁽⁸⁾

Idea of Swadeshi Samaj

The political thought of Tagore is little known and less understood in our country. Tagore moved on and on; he had never stopped in the interest of a particular cult, nor did he propose to set up a school of his own in vindication of his doctrine.⁽⁹⁾ Rabindranath Tagore was a nationalist out and out. He wanted to free nationalism from a narrow circumference. He had deep faith on the spiritual fellowship of man. He viewed that nationalism fosters separatism. In his words- "Separatist nationalism devoid of love for mankind is a great menace." He rejected the idea of 'Nation-State and believed in 'the great federation of man'. To quote him, "pride patriotism is not for me. I earnestly hope that I shall find my home anywhere in the world before I leave it."⁽¹⁰⁾ Tagore was deeply moved with the proposal regarding the Partition of Bengal.

The Partition of Bengal in 1905 was made on October 16 by Viceroy Curzon. Partition was promoted for administrative reasons: Bengal was as large as France but with a significantly larger population. Curzon decided the eastern region was neglected and under-governed. By splitting the province, an improved administration could be established in the east where, subsequently the population would benefit from new schools and employment opportunities. However, other motives lurked behind the partition plan. Bengali Hindus were in the forefront of the political agitation for greater participation in governance; their position would be weakened, since Muslims would dominate in the East. Hindus tended to oppose partition, which was more popular among Muslims. What followed partition, however, stimulated an almost national anti-British movement that involved non-violent and violent protests, boycotts and even an assassination attempt against the Governor of the new province of West Bengal. Partition sparked a major political crisis along religious lines. Hindu resistance exploded as the Indian National Congress began the Swadeshi movement that included boycotting British goods, terrorism, and diplomatic pressure. The Muslims in East Bengal hoped that a separate region would give them more control over for education and employment, but they instead lost ground. In 1906, Rabindranath Tagore wrote *Amar Shonar Bangla* as a rallying cry for proponents of annulment of Partition; in 1972, it became the national anthem of Bangladesh.

Tagore was concerned about Bengal partition and the overall colonial attitude. He emphasized on the overall rethinking on the part of our national leaders. He thought of reconsidering the whole paradigm of the nationalist movement. He was different from other thinkers of his time, he was not concentrating on the immediate need but was paying attention for a broader and on the future perspective. Tagore lamented that we had neglected to pay due attention to our social system and that our whole perspective was being directed outward. In our country it was the king who warred and hunted and the burden of civic obligations was cast on the people. Where the responsibility for the welfare of people lies, there beats the heart of the nation. Hence, Tagore was insistent on repeating “that disaster can only overtake our country when its social body, its SAMAJ, is crippled”, it explained how the state was burdened with the British rule.⁽¹¹⁾

Tagore presented the concept of Swadeshi Samaj as a speech in the month of July in 1904. There was a government order relating to distribution of drinking water. The Bengal Government was requested to tackle the sufferance. Tagore showed that how for drinking water one was dependent on the Government. Tagore pointed out that Government in our country has no relation with our society and no place in the social organization, so that whatever we may seek from it must be brought at the expense of certain freedom. He even pointed out that we Indians have had accepted the bonds of subjection under many races and many kings, but the society had always carried on its own duties and never allowed anyone from outside to intervene in its affairs. When Majesty was banished from the land SOCIAL GRACE always remained.⁽¹²⁾

Rabindranath Tagore pointed out that India is very much Samaj oriented civilization. It lives in the samaj and not in the state. The very concept of State is essentially a European coinage. It evolved from the west. The very concept of society was termed as the Samaj. The colonial rule in India did not create much difference in the concept of State and Society, it equated both. According to Tagore the state and society which has come so closer desperately needed a rupture for the welfare of the people. The society should maintain autonomy and independent position of its own. Unless and until the society maintains its independent position it will not be in a position to secure the rights and freedom of the individual. In that scenario according to Tagore “**from joldaan to bidyadaan**” we are helplessly dependent on the government and the state. Previously the social life of the country was never and touched and disturbed by the State. The state was only carrying out extremely restricted tasks, such as enforcing law and order, fighting, and providing security against enemy attack. The Samaj ruled over the whole social life. The social life in Europe and the West was centered around the state, and the situation was very different. The church's operations were preserved by the English state. Hardly any area is unaffected by the European state.

Rabindranath Tagore was primarily concerned about the question of whether a society should be society-centric or state-centric, and that decision should be made internally rather than being imposed from above. People in the West State voluntarily and involuntarily embraced the state as the natural result. State formation was based on free will, not coercion. Rabindranath Tagore was man who was scientific in his approach, he even had a scientific temperament. He never stressed

on the fact of going back to earlier times and maintaining the earlier or Prachin Samaj. But he definitely held the views of maintaining the autonomous social life. He even talked about the autonomous individual, he said due to the interference of the state in every sphere had made the individual incapable of doing their own work. They are always dependent on the state. Tagore was keen that the masses should understand the position and seek to remedy the wrongs. They are left unorganised, they are even not acquainted with the true situation, they bemoan and lament. For Tagore state function as the subsidiary organisation to keep law and order, as society is the living organism to harmonise antagonism and division.⁽¹³⁾ Tagore while providing his concept tries to offers a blueprint- not reviving the past but welcoming the new technologies and developing the rural life. He repeatedly stressed on the fact that we should accept and follow only those things from the west which will strengthen our culture and our nation. The concept of Swadeshi Samaj was blueprint of regeneration of India in the context of modern life.

In the present day scenario the emergence of the civil society and the public sphere is exactly the same feature which Tagore pointed out during the 19th century. Tagore's concept of Swadeshi Samaj is the beginner of the contemporary CIVIL SOCIETY and PUBLIC SPHERE. In the present day immense efforts are being made to keep a separate space in the state for the individual to project and point out their views. Tagore wanted exactly the same thing where individual will retain their own identity and not forcefully accept the dictates of the state. Standing in the 21st century we can see people following the same line once projected by the great man RABINDRANATH TAGORE.

Rabindranath Tagore was undoubtedly the greatest mind with full of aesthetic beauty and wisdom. However that mark of beauty or wisdom were never meant for any kind of professional or political or intellectual exercises. He was the greatest mind from our civilization who was truly humanist. The overall orientation regarding each and every aspect of life was guided by humanist orientation fervour. Each and every part of his life was guided by human love. Tagore gave a clarion call to do away with fear, suspicion, distrust, hatred, national egoism etc. On the other hand, he wanted to foster love, mutual understanding, and friendship. Brotherhood etc. among the people of the world. This will definitely create a better world for the living of human beings.⁽¹⁴⁾

Idea of Hindu-Muslim Relations

Rabindranath Tagore was deeply moved with the then biggest ongoing problem of the society- the division of the society on the basis of religion and caste lines. The entire problematic Tagore sought to entertain from a humanist perspective. Tagore was never guided by any narrow sectarian perspective. Tagore from the pure humanist perspective, he considered that India is no single nation but a '**MAHAJATI**' finest embodiment of unity. Tagore considered India each and every community as the petals of the same flower. With this understanding he sought to understand the relation between Hindus and Muslims in particular and the entire communities in general.

"Peace is true and not conflict, Love is true and not hatred; and Truth is the One, not the disjointed multitude"- this sums up the contents of Tagore's religion, his approach to life and to life's problem. Rabindranath Tagore treated the Hindu-Muslim problem as essentially one to be solved mainly by our own efforts and principally through mutual understanding.⁽¹⁵⁾ The central question arise here is who are the Hindus and the Muslims? The two communities Hindus and the Muslims are two different distinct religious communities. Though these two communities had lived in India for almost more than 1000 years, but they have failed miserably to develop any kind of synthesis. As a result their practices, beliefs, their ways of living, social-cultural orientations, their life patterns, their value system are widely different from each other.

Tagore gave his own interpretation where he appears to be modern and rational. He stands unique for his understanding and responses to the Hindu –Muslim problem in one of the worst phases of our history. For Tagore, Hindu and Muslim are not simply the two religious communities living side by side for over centuries where the latter are to be treated as outsiders and the former as indigenous. Tagore said the term "**HINDU**" does not denote any religious sect or creed as it can be said of Islam or Christianity. The word '**MUSSALMAN**' refers to a special religion, but not the word

Hindu. Hinduism does not stand for any single faith or faith reached by any single prophet. Neither does it possess any permanent religious characteristics, nor does it owe its existence to a particular text. Hindus in India constitute a *JATI* or *RACE* which has evolved through centuries. Hindus of India constitute a nation. A **HINDU** is an ethno-social culmination of the history of **BHARATVARSA**. It has passed through several ages, crossed several stages and bears the stamp of several thinkers and their system of thought. Hindus have shared a long chain of socio-cultural legacy.

By contrast Tagore does not deny that a Muslim is defined primarily by his religion. Muslims living in different countries and different societies do exhibit considerable degree of differences in terms of their religious, cultural and social traits. It was thus said that Indian Musalmans or for that matter Indian Christians should be taken as part and parcel of Hindus of India. Tagore argues that nothing is permanent in Hinduism, it has brought many creeds and beliefs systems within its fold. Tagore raised a point that BRAHMOS were not Hindus but still they were present within the same fold being a different community.⁽¹⁶⁾

The issue of Hindu-Muslim question in India according to Tagore came to the forefront at the backdrop of political power and the greatest being the Partition of Bengal basing upon religious lines. The Sarkar Bahadur went on taking the undue advantage of the difference between the two communities. Tagore proposes that for the emergence of greater BHARATVARSA the unification among all the communities is very necessary. Hinduism will have to incorporate each and every other community within its own fold and then a proper emergence of a nation would occur. Tagore points out that there is a point of contrast between the two communities- for the Hindus rituals are of prime importance whereas for the Muslims belief in the faith is the primary thing. Tagore hopes for a serious unity among the two communities for the emergence of a MAHAJATI and a greater nation, where each and every individual will be at par with each other and there would be no signs of discrimination basing upon religious, caste, class lines.

Tagore's political thought was tortuous. He opposed imperialism and supported Indian nationalists, and these views were first revealed in *Manast*, which was mostly composed in his twenties. Evidence produced during the Hindu-German Conspiracy Trial and latter accounts affirm his awareness of the Ghadarites, and stated that he sought the support of Japanese Prime Minister Terauchi Masatake and former Premier Ōkuma Shigenobu. Yet he lampooned the Swadeshi movement; he rebuked it in "The Cult of the Charka", an acrid 1925 essay. He urged the masses to avoid victimology and instead seek self-help and education, and he saw the presence of British administration as a "political symptom of our social disease". He maintained that, even for those at the extremes of poverty, "there can be no question of blind revolution"; preferable to it was a "steady and purposeful education". Such views enraged many. He escaped assassination—and only narrowly—by Indian expatriates during his stay in a San Francisco hotel in late 1916; the plot failed when his would-be assassins fell into argument. Yet Tagore wrote songs lionising the Indian independence movement Two of Tagore's more politically charged compositions, "Chitto Jetha Bhayshunyo" ("Where the Mind is Without Fear") and "Ekla Chalo Re" ("If They Answer Not to Thy Call, Walk Alone"), gained mass appeal, with the latter favoured by Gandhi. Though somewhat critical of Gandhian activism, Tagore was key in resolving a Gandhi-Ambedkar dispute involving separate electorates for untouchables.⁽¹⁷⁾

Rabindranath Tagore was truly a man of the whole Earth, a product of the best of both traditional Indian, and modern Western cultures. He exemplifies the ideals important to us of Goodness, Meaningful Work, and World Culture. Tagore wanted man to emerge in his best and fullest stature. He also wanted society and on its behalf the state to create the necessary conditions for this to happen.⁽¹⁸⁾ Tagore was the poet philosopher of the country having his own distinct set of ideas and beliefs on the various problems and issues facing the country during the early decades of the twentieth century. The uniqueness of the political thought of Tagore appears to be the metaphysical foundations of his contemplations which led him to think more in terms of moral and spiritual awakening of the country, instead of focussing on the need for political independence. His conceptualisations though rooted in the moral and religious framework of Indian philosophy, had practical and wider implication as he tried to develop a cosmopolitan perspective of life in India.⁽¹⁹⁾

Thus we can rightly conclude by saying that Rabindranath Tagore all through his life went on thriving for a society

where freedom and basic rights to the people will be given, no discrimination. He went on working for the complete emancipation of the individual and strictly maintained that modernity should be welcomed but at the same time old traditions should be fitted into the structure of modernity. One man he was on every field to whichever he belonged he excelled in every field. He was the true follower of the right path as he believed that “by unrighteousness man prospers, gains what seems desirable, defeats enemies, but perishes at the root”.⁽²⁰⁾

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