

# RABINDRANATH TAGORE

## Key themes :

- Nationalism
- Cosmopolitanism
- Idea of man



# A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

- Period: 1861 -1941
- Rabindranath Tagore was the youngest son of Debendranath Tagore, himself a leader of the *Brahmo Samaj*. Tagore was mostly taught at home and was sent to England for formal schooling which he did not complete. In his mature years he started his experimental school at *Shantiniketan* and tried to impart education following the *Upanishadic* ideals.
- Tagore was a prolific and accomplished poet, novelist, essayist, painter, and playwright. He was an early success in his native Bengal and through the translations he soon attained great fame in the West and eventually embark upon the visiting, lecturing in different parts of the world. It is rightly said for the world he represent the voice of spiritual India – an Oriental Guru, and for India he became a great living institution.
- Tagore made significant contributions to the development of Indian philosophy in the early twentieth century. But he is lesser known as a political philosopher.

- In 1913 he became the first non-European to win the Nobel prize in literature.
- Some of his works are- **Gitanjali** (song offerings), **Gora** (Fair-faced), **Ghare-Baire** (The home and the world)
- His compositions were chosen by two nations as their national anthems: India's '*Jana Gana mana*' and Bangladesh's 'Amar Shonar Bangla'. It is said that Sri Lankan national anthem is also inspired by his work.

# HIS TIME

- Tagore actively participated in the politics of his time.
- His early association with the Hindu Mela (1875), Calcutta session of the National Congress (1886, 1896, 1906), Bengal Provincial Congress in Natore (1897) and Pabna (1908) were preparatory to the prominent role he played in the country wide agitation against the partition of Bengal (1900-5).
- He got involved in some of the great debates of his time for example the boycott of western goods and education, the pristine values of Indian culture, the curse of aggressive nationalism etc.
- Tagore renounced his knighthood in response to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919 that had been conferred upon him by Lord Hardinge in 1915 .

# Conditions that pushed the poet into the political arena :

- He belonged to one of the leading and most affluent Zamindar families of Bengal. As a practitioner of Zamindari he could sense the cruelty associated with the system and this made him genuinely apologetic and embarrassed. Therefore, he was also critical of zamindar's claim to represent the interest of the people.
- He also criticized the narrow opportunism and utter slavishness of the so called intelligentsia within the Congress. According to him, this group within the Congress had no constructive ideal. So he took upon himself a moral responsibility or patriotic duty to save the country from the political deception of the self-styled political leaders of his time.

- He was against the idea of revolting against the symbolic, sporadic and short lived promise of 'self sufficiency' held out by 'Charkha' movement of Mahatma Gandhi.
- He was equally critical of the tendency of uncritical acceptance demanded of the people in Gandhiji's programme for non-cooperation. He was skeptical of leaders like Gandhiji's call for boycotting the foreign goods or clothes in the belief that western textiles were impure. Tagore believed that it may influence public mind by using untruth to sustain a political agitation
- He opposed the non-cooperation movement launched by Gandhi in 1920's as it was based on blind national pride. He argued that parochial anti-west tendencies within the national movement can not develop India's cooperation with the international community.

# ON NATIONALISM

- Rabindranath Tagore wrote an essay in 1917 titled “Nationalism in India,” in which he considers the specific challenges faced by India in developing a national self-consciousness as well as the need for that consciousness to be grounded in Indian cultural sensibilities.
- According to Tagore, the real problem of India was not political, but it was social. It was a condition that he says prevails not only in India but among all nations i.e called race problem.
- India has acknowledged the real differences between races but yet seek for some basis of unity through our saints like Nanak, Kabir etc.

- He says that there is a need to prove our humanity by solving the internal differences through mutual help and finding some true basis for reconciliation.
- Rabindranath Tagore's reflections on the concepts and practices of civilisation, nationalism, and community are directly concerned with the nature of modern political power and its underlying assumptions about human life.



# Tagore on Nationalism :

- *“I am not against one nation in particular, but against the general idea of all nations. What is the Nation?...the wisdom of the Nation is not in its faith in humanity but in its complete distrust...Yes, this is the logic of the Nation. And it will never heed the voice of truth and goodness. It will go on in its ring-dance of moral corruption, linking steel unto steel, and machine unto machine; trampling under its tread all the sweet flowers of simple faith and the living ideals of man.”*
- *“Nationalism is a great menace. It is the particular thing which for years has been at the bottom of India’s troubles.”*
- *“Patriotism can’t be our final spiritual shelter. I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live.”*

- According to him, Nationalism, if blown by force would wreak havoc in India.
- Nationalism, according to Tagore, is not "a spontaneous self-expression of man as social being, but rather a political and commercial union of a group of people, in which they congregate to maximise their profit, progress and power; it is the organised self-interest of a people, where it is least human and least spiritual".
- Tagore deemed nationalism a recurrent threat to humanity, because, with its propensity for the material and the rational, it trampled over the human spirit and human emotion; it upset man's moral balance.

- He claims that India has never had a real sense of nationalism, and that nationalism has for years been at the bottom of India's troubles.
- Indian should fight against the education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity.
- He said , “When you borrow things that do not belong to your life then they only serve to crush your life”. Therefore, India, in his opinion, should follow her own destiny rather than merely imitate the west.

- Nationalism was the breeding ground for imperialism. Tagore also found the obsession with nationalism as a source of war, hatred and mutual suspicion between and among the nations. Tagore viewed nationalism as a danger to humanity.
- Tagore was opposed to the idea of the nation; he was even more fiercely opposed to India joining the bandwagon of nationalism. According to him, this would compromise India's history and identity as a culture and bring it under the shadow of the West.
- Tagore's animosity to nationalism is not that he was not patriotic or that he was anti-West. He believed in a symbiosis of the East and West, a 'deep association' or a living relationship between the two cultures; a creative unity that was possible only when the East had discovered its soul and its own identity.

- Tagore never allowed his love for his country to stand in the way of his love for truth, justice and humanity. He did not submit to a national consciousness but to a world-consciousness - a *visva-bodh*, in which every country would keep alight its own lamp of mind as its share in the illumination of the whole world or humanity.
- According to him, one way of achieving a sense of collectivity among the divided people is to revive the old institution of community festivals and spread it far and wide.
- Tagore's vision might seem idealistic but it is perhaps, not unattainable. It calls for a humanitarian intervention into present self-seeking and belligerent nationalism, through the introduction of a moral and spiritual dimension in the institutions.

- The central concern of Tagore's scheme was to highlight the gulf that would inevitably appear between nationalism at the political level and community consciousness at the social level, unless the latter was allowed to mature simultaneously if not ahead of the former.
- Tagore's disenchantment with nationalism in the west was due to its expansionist etatism (Total control of the state over individual citizens), his anxieties about nationalism at home arose from the inadequate social base on which it was likely to rest.
- According to Tagore, nationalism by itself cannot act as a magic wand capable of conjuring away the numerous divisive forces.

# References

1. 'Nationalism in India' by Rabindranath Tagore ,1917.
2. 'Political thought in modern India' edited by Thomas Pantham and K. L. Deutsch.
3. 'Sources of Indian tradition' edited by Rachel fell mcdermott, Leonard A . Gordon, Ainslie T. Embree, Frances W. Pritchett, & Dennis Dalton.
4. 'Another Asia -Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tensin' by Rusto Bharucha.
5. 'Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Essays' published by Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd.