

CHAPTER FOUR :

TAGORE'S IDEAS ON NATIONALISM :

A Critical Study :-

: CHAPTER - IV :

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Tagore's ideas on nationalisms were rooted in his reformist ideology but where as the liberals like Ranade and Gokhale wanted to establish the modern nation-state in India. Tagore had some reservations about it. But he did not belong to the school of extremist nationalism. Despite the rejection of the western civilization the extremists wanted to establish nation-state in this country. Thus he stood at the cross roads of two streams of modern Indian political ideology.

Tagore inherited the reformist tradition of Brohmoism expounded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy. The Brohmo movement was the outcome of the influence of western liberalism, aimed at the modernization of traditional social ideas and institutions. The social thinking of Tagore was developed under the influence of the Brohmo ideology. Due to this liberal, non-sectarian and humanist cultural background of the Tagore family, Rabindra Nath was able to develop a broad and rational outlook towards the society as well as individual life. In this context Tagore wrote, " when I was born, our family had



already cut loose its social moorings and floated away from the common harbour and the common Hindu traditions of numerous rituals and ceremonials, and the worship of gods and goddesses had left only faint traces in our house... we were on the threshold of a new age, but we could not see its features yet. Besides, we were utterly unlike the other Bengali families and had our own peculiar spirit and tradition" ¹.

Rabindra Nath Tagore (1861 A.D.- 1941 A.D.) grew to manhood in a highly cultured family environment. A number of his brothers and sisters were artistically inclined - one composed music, another staged amateur plays and dramas, and several contributed to the literary magazine edited by their elder brother, who was also philosopher. The spiritual ideas of Tagore were decisively shaped by his father's influence. Thus, the enlightened atmosphere of the family helped in a large way to shape the moral ideas of Tagore. As the chief Protagonist of the Brahmo ideology, Tagore's family was able to overcome the authoritative customs and traditions prevailed in the contemporary Hindu society. Religious thinking, patriotism and a great devotion to art and literature were the main qualities of the Tagore family. Thus, the Tagore family was an unique example of the harmonious blending of the two streams of thought - the thought of the East and the West. In one side it upheld the ancient Indian cultural and spiritual tradition, on the other

it imbibed the virtues of the western philosophy, art and literature.

Tagore was deeply attached to the land of his birth and while studying Indian history, he sought to reject the Western historiography that tried to see Indian history in terms of wars and conquest. His description of Indian history as the gradual absorption and incorporation of the tribal elements through a very delicate mechanism of synthesis was interesting and it must be admitted that it was an interesting insight.

Tagore's discussion on the western and the Eastern civilization was relevant but one must hasten to add that Tagore tried to oversimplify the problem because he sought to condemn everything that was Western and glorified the Eastern tradition.

Tagore's criticism of the Western civilization was right as far as he criticised that the large number of men were used as material and human relationships had in a large measure become utilitarian man was imperfectly revealed.² Also, he pointed out the adverse effects of developed capitalism, where man was alienated from his creative spirit and ideals. Moreover, he correctly understood the logic of change - the developed capitalism, into imperialism. The emergence of the nation-states in Europe made the way for the

development of capitalism in Europe and it created bitter hostility among the European peoples. Tagore's evaluation of the basic ingredients of the western civilization was right because the out break of two great wars was the outcome of the struggle for more profit and power among the European nations. He correctly commented that the great powers of the West were seeking peace, not by curbing their greed, or by giving up the exclusive advantages which they had unjustly acquired, but by concentrating their forces for mutual security.³

Tagore did not take into consideration the positive aspects of western civilization though he took into consideration the development of science and technology. Tagore's criticism at times tended to be more extreme.

His discussion on the Eastern civilization was full of tensions as at one place, he praised the Eastern civilization for the capacity to synthesise the different racial and linguistic groups. At other place he blamed Indian caste system for the lack of unity in the Indian society. He did not take into consideration the fact that the Indian caste system was the result of the synthetic social policies. He tried to compare medieval Indian political values with the modern capitalist political values, though he knew that the Indian values could not become substitute to modern capitalistic

values. His argument that in India society was more important than the state was not based upon empirical evidence.

Tagore's criticism of nationalism was based upon his criticism of Western civilization and the same ideas run through his discussion. He was of the opinion that the rise of nation-states in Europe created the conflict of interests among the European people. Nationalism, according to him, was a great menace and it was the root cause of major evils of the present day world. It was a political and economic organization oriented to exploit other races, particularly of Asia and Africa. He defined, "Nationalism is the training of whole people for a narrow ideal and the nation is of the political and economic union of a people in which whole people are organized for a mechanical purpose." Thus, according to him, it was an artificial creation, a negation of man's social instincts, of which the main element was greed and jealousy, or it was the mere abstraction of man's lust for power and profit.

But Tagore's whole-sale condemnation of the idea of nationalism was unrealistic and lacked a historical perspective because nations had evolved in the process of social development to meet the fundamental socio-economic needs of the society.⁴ The main objective of the idea of nationalism was to enhance the process of social integration

on a new economic basis. According to professor Hans Kohn, "Nationalism is a state of mind, permeating the large majority of a people and claiming to permeate all its members, it recognises the nation-state as the ideal form of political organization and the nationality as the source for all creative cultural life and economic well being. The supreme loyalty of man is therefore due to his nationality, as his own life is supposedly rooted in and made possible by its welfare." ⁵ The emergence of the idea of nationalism saved man from the tyranny and the disunity of the medieval age. It fostered the growth of modern political man by promoting the idea of national consciousness. It was a powerful ideological force in the struggle of enslaved peoples for their political emancipation. It was the main source of inspiration for the development of modern art and literature in the various countries. It inculcated the feeling of emotional attachment and greater devotion of the people towards the nation. To love one's own country and to work for her good and prosperity did not necessarily mean to be an enemy of other peoples on the contrary a real nationalist loved his people and respected other peoples. True nationalism denoted such a love for one's country as it could not tolerate social and national enslavement of one people by another. But the love of one's country could not in any way hinder the solidarity of the people of all nations, or the

recognition of equality, freedom and independence of other peoples. There was a difference between healthy, patriotic nationalism from arrogant and aggressive nationalism. Tagore failed to make this distinction and laid more stress on aggressive nationalism, whose another name was chauvinism. This misconception was natural because when the lectures on nationalism were delivered by Tagore, (The book Nationalism was a compilation of his lectures, On nationalism delivered in Japan and America in 1916),⁶ it was the mature stage of imperialism. The First World War was raging among the European nations for the extension of their colonies in the Afro-Asian continent. Belligerent invasion and conquest were the dominant traits of the Western nationalism. It was the historical fact that the rise of nation-states in Europe made the way for the growth of early capitalism by terminating the feudal social order. But the economic aspects of Western nationalism had its natural corollary for the advent of imperial powers of the West. And they pursued aggressive foreign policy towards each other for the absorption of new economic changes in their own society. Modern capitalism at a certain stage turned into imperialism and made use of the national state as its political instrument. Imperialism and monopoly capitalism were in this sense interchangeable terms. Monopoly capitalism was based on colonial exploitation of the

subject peoples and other weaker races and was the main cause of war among the rival imperial groups. It was obvious that the assumption of Tagore's views on nationalism was based largely on predatory imperialism. In fact, nationalism and imperialism were not interchangeable terms. Thus, Tagore had blurred the division line between nationalism and imperialism. Nationalism was a universal phenomenon. It was neither good nor bad, its justification was purely functional.⁷ It was a tool to enhance the national glory and prestige of the people in home and abroad. The quality of the tool might be good or bad, largely depended upon the real motive of the user of the tool.

Tagore also failed to grasp the inner potentiality and the progressive role of the idea of nationalism of the colonial countries in their struggle for national independence from the foreign domination. He equated the nationalism of the west with that of the nationalism of the Afro-Asian countries. But the nature of the two were not identical because the nationalism of the west cherished the cult of jingoism, on the other hand the nationalism of the colonial countries posed challenge to the imperial rule of the Western nations due to their indomitable inner urge for national self-determination.

Regarding the emergence of Indian nationalism Tagore's analysis was correct when he wrote " India has never had a real sense of nationalism ". It was largely due to the impact of

the British rule and western education that nationalism emerged in this country. The Indian National Congress was established in 1885^{A.D} to materialize the organized expression of Indian Nationalism. Tagore welcomed the formation of the Indian National Congress. But subsequently, he was disappointed as he did not like the negative role of the party regarding the matters of social reform. According to him, social reform was essential for the realization of real freedom. More over his argument about the absence of the basis of Indian nationalism had no historical perspective, because Indian nationalism emerged inspite of religious, regional and linguistic differences among the Indian people.

Tagore criticised nationalism as a great menace and pointed it as the root cause of India's troubles. If nationalism was a menace what would be the alternative to it ? Tagore did not suggest the alternative to nationalism or nation-state system. How ever, he preached the idea of spiritual internationalism, theoretically it was good, but in actual practice, it was long way to achieve. Moreover Tagore's views about the role of Indian Nationalism was not free from criticism. Indian nationalism emerged to challenge the British rule, and it played a progressive role in Indian social development. It helped to forge disunited Indian people into an united nation. Indian people were able to

terminate feudal anarchy due to the blessings of the idea of nationalism. The sense of national consciousness helped to work out the political and social integration of Indian sub-continent.

So far as Tagore's conception of state and society was concerned, he had preference for society above the state, so far India's case was concerned. He was the ardent supporters of individual freedom and warned against the arbitrary action of the state for the protection of individual freedom. According to him, India through out her history sought to achieve social unity with all different people while fully enjoying the freedom of maintaining their own differences. But in the age of socialism and welfare state organised state initiative was essential for the over all development of individual and society.

According to Tagore, the inner spirit of Indian society was of toleration and the accomodation of the dissents into her own social system. He pointed out the institution of caste as the outcome of the spirit of toleration. It was historical fact that the social conflict did not emerge in India due to the most pervasive effect of caste system. But he criticised the evil effects of the caste system. According to him, it was the dull mechanism which prevented the spontanious development of individual personality. It breed conservatism, inaction, suppressed the spirit of dynamism and initiative. Therefore, he criticised hereditary rights and pleaded equal opportunity for all sections of the society.

Due to the social stratification, the lower stratum of the society was subject to perpetual tyranny. Under the supremacy of the caste-system the dynamism and social mobility was lost and the Indian society remained stagnant and unprogressive. Most peculiar thing should be noted here that Tagore glorified as well as criticised the role of caste in the history of Indian social development.

Regarding the nationalism of Japan, Tagore expressed the hope that she took the concept of nationalism from the west but she kept intact the spirit of the East. The hope of Tagore proved futile when Japan became the most aggressive imperial power of the East. She was the main Asian actor and the collaborator of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy during the second World War. However, Tagore criticised the war-mongering policy of Japan during Second World War in his later writings on sino-Japanese conflict.⁸

Tagore correctly understood the future perspective of the American nationalism and her potentiality of being super power in the near future. The evaluation of Tagore was proved correct when the balance of power was transferred in the hands of united states of America with the decay of power of the Western nations.

Tagore was the bridge builder of the Eastern and the Western civilization. He was the admirer of the Western

civilization due to her remarkable achievements in the spheres of science and technology, but he cautioned against the adverse effects of excessive industrialization and mechanization. Science brought industrialization and it in turn sought to crush individuality. He was the lover of humanity and hence he criticised the civilization which was based on mere industrialization. According to Tagore, the European civilization was based on power and profit and it paved the way for rapid industrialization. In his dramas Mukta Dhara (Free current) and Rakta Karabi (Red Oleanders) he raised voice against the soul-shattering organization based on misapplication of science.⁹ Though, Tagore condemned the evils of technological civilization, he did not reject science and technology.

Tagore advocated the synthesis of both Eastern and Western civilization. But, the country like India had her own cultural tradition. Her religion, caste-system and the ways of life were less conducive to assimilate the western culture in her own social life. European societies experienced a number of social revolutions and the rate of social change was rapid in those societies. On the other hand, the Eastern societies maintained the continuity of tradition without any experience of strenuous socio-economic upheavals. It was for this reason that the Eastern culture remained more conservative

and traditionalist and the rate of social change was very slow.

: TAGORE'S RELEVANCE :

Tagore's ideas on India history, Eastern and Western civilization and nationalism were influenced by his broad humanism and his unhappiness over the role of Western civilization and in giving birth to aggressive nation-states and capitalism and imperialism.

Tagore was the great critic of Western nationalism because he knew that if the Eastern countries blindly followed the West they would also give more importance to power and profit. Tagore's criticism of the Western nationalism is relevant in the light of recent criticism against the development theories of Western political scientists by the political scientists from the third world countries. Rajani Kothari and Andre Gunder Frank are the two important critiques of Western development theories.

According to professor Rajani Kothari the development theories expounded by the Western social scientist are deterministic and they want to see that the third world countries follow the western model of political development.

Western theorists put more emphasis on economic and scientific and technological development as a part of modernization of traditional societies. In brief, economic development was the pre-requisite for building a nation was the burden of the argument of the Western model of development. They ignored the other social and political factors that influenced the political change of a nation.

Rajani Kothari held a view that in every country political development would assume its own form and it would not be a pale imitation of the west.¹⁰

Tagore, thus anticipated the problem^{of} development long time ago and pointed out that every country, every civilisation should contribute to the development of universal humanism because every civilisation had something to offer.

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CHAPTER - IVNotes and Reference

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