

Nationalism in Debate: Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi in Contrast

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Abstract:

This article examines the debate on nationalism between Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi, two of the most important thinkers of modern India. It highlights how both thinkers tried to explain the meaning and purpose of nationalism. But reached very different conclusions. Gandhi believed that nationalism is necessary and should be based on moral values like truth, non-violence, and inclusiveness. For him, the nation is a step between the individual and humanity, and true nationalism should work for the welfare of all people, not only just one country. He supported unity in diversity and believed that different religions and cultures could live together peacefully within a nation. In contrast, Tagore strongly criticized nationalism, especially its Western form. He argued that nationalism is a mechanical and power-driven system that reduces human values and creates conflict, competition, and division. According to him, nationalism often leads to aggression and imperialism. Instead, Tagore supported the idea of universal humanism, where people go beyond national boundaries and connect through shared human values. The article shows that the main difference between Gandhi and Tagore lies in their approach. Gandhi wanted to reform nationalism and make it ethical, while Tagore wanted to move beyond it, towards infinity. A balanced view suggests combining Gandhi's inclusive nationalism with Tagore's humanistic ideas. This can help create a form of nationalism that promotes peace, unity, and respect for humanity.

Key words: Nationalism, Humanism, Ethical Nationalism, Internationalism, Gandhi, Tagore, Spiritual Internationalism, Colonialism.

Introduction:

The debate on nationalism in modern India is profoundly shaped by the intellectual exchange between Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi; two towering figures whose ideas continue to influence political and philosophical discourse. Writing in the context of colonial domination and global upheavals, both thinkers sought to redefine the meaning and purpose of the nation, yet arrived at strikingly different conclusions. Gandhi envisioned nationalism as an ethical and inclusive framework rooted in moral responsibility, cultural pluralism, and non-violence, where the nation serves as a bridge between the individual and humanity. In contrast, Tagore offered a powerful critique of nationalism, portraying it as a mechanical, power-driven construct that threatens human values and fosters division and conflict. His emphasis on

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universal humanism challenged the very foundations of nation related thinking. This divergence reflects not merely a political disagreement but a deeper philosophical tension between reforming and transcending nationalism. By examining their contrasting perspectives, this article aims to explore the moral possibilities and limitations of nationalism, ultimately seeking a balanced approach that integrates ethical nation-building with a broader commitment to humanity.

Tagore View on Nationalism:

Rabindranath Tagore emerged as one of the most profound critics of nationalism in the early twentieth century, particularly emphasizing its inhumane and mechanical character. The idea of nationalism is developing in Europe and the idea of nationalism with national freedom movement is developing in India both are different for Tagore. Tagore don't want to follow the European feature of nationalism in the matter of Indian national movement or Indian nationalism. Because the idea of European nationalism is a product of modern science and technological advancement in Europe. Due to industrial revolution many people join hand together to maximize the benefits of this invention. Such mechanical coming together lacks of moral and social values which make their nationalism aggressive in nature. With out moral and social value of nationalism is goes against the larger interest of humanity and also takes the form of colonialism and imperialism. Tagore was against the European idea of nationalism but he was not against the nationalist freedom movement of his time which was mainly focused on freeing the soul of India from British colonialism. Although he was initially a passionate supporter of nationalist ideas during the Swadeshi Movement, his faith in nationalism gradually declined as he witnessed the rise of political extremism and revolutionary violence within the movement. His withdrawal from active political engagement during this period reflected a deeper philosophical shift,

“I am not against one nation in particular, but against the general idea of all nations. What is the Nation? It is the aspect of a whole people as an organized power.”(1). Nationalism turns people into part of a powerful system that always pushes them to become stronger and more efficient. In doing so, it takes away their natural human qualities like kindness, creativity, and self-sacrifice. People start serving the system instead of moral values. They feel satisfied thinking they are doing something good, but actually avoid personal responsibility by depending on this mechanical organization, which can ultimately become harmful to humanity.

Tagore's disillusionment intensified in the context of global developments such as World War I, Japan's imperial aggression, and the spread of revolutionary terrorism in India. These events revealed to him the destructive potential of nationalism, which he came to view as a force driven by greed, power, and material expansion rather than ethical or spiritual ideals. Tagore conceptualized the nation not as a natural social community but as an artificial and mechanical organization rooted in industrial capitalism. He argued that the nation is essentially a political and commercial union formed to maximize profit and power, thereby reducing human beings to instruments of economic and political objectives. This mechanization of society, according to Tagore, strips away the human element and replaces it with a lifeless pursuit of efficiency and material gain.

In elaborating his critique, Tagore employed the metaphor of the handloom and the power loom to distinguish between organic and mechanical forms of social organization. While the handloom symbolized the creativity, harmony, and human touch inherent in traditional societies, the power loom represented the impersonal, monotonous, and mechanical nature of the modern nation-state. Through this analogy, he underscored his belief that nationalism dehumanizes individuals by subordinating them to the rigid structures of political and economic systems. Furthermore, Tagore described the nation as a geographical demon that encourages conflict, conquest, and competition rather than cooperation and mutual understanding. He argued that once individuals identify themselves primarily as members of a nation, they develop a false sense of superiority over others and cultivate hostility towards those outside their national boundaries.

Significantly, Tagore's critique was not limited to violent or aggressive nationalism; he was equally suspicious of the non-violent nationalism advocated by Mahatma Gandhi. He regarded Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement as a form of 'parochial nationalism' that, despite its moral intentions, risked fostering isolation and narrowing India's engagement with the wider world. Tagore believed that nationalism, whether violent or non-violent, was inherently prone to exclusion and could ultimately undermine the broader ideals of humanity. This divergence in perspective led to an important intellectual debate between Tagore and Gandhi, reflecting two fundamentally different approaches to the question of national identity and freedom.

Ultimately, Tagore replaced the narrow and mechanical idea of nationalism with a broader philosophy of spiritual internationalism. Unlike Marxist or socialist internationalism, which focused on class solidarity, Tagore's internationalism was grounded in the harmony of cultures, religions, and human values. He envisioned a world where individuals transcended artificial boundaries and connected through shared humanity and spiritual unity. For Tagore, the true essence of human civilization lay not in the assertion of national power but in the cultivation of empathy, creativity, and moral responsibility. Thus, his critique of nationalism was not merely a rejection of a political ideology but a profound affirmation of the universal and humane dimensions of human existence.

Gandhi View on Nationalism:

Gandhiji said: "Suffering then is the secret. Hatred is not essential for nationalism. Race hatred will kill the real national spirit."(2). For Gandhi, nationalism in this view, is not about gaining freedom by harming or dominating others. Instead, it means achieving independence in a way that respects all nations and contributes to the greater good of humanity. A truly free country should inspire others and use its resources for the welfare of all. Just as individuals may sacrifice for larger communities, a nation too should be ready to act for the benefit of the world. Such nationalism rejects hatred and promotes universal human unity.

The idea of nationalism developed by Mahatma Gandhi represents a distinctive and ethically grounded vision that differs significantly from the dominant Western notions of nationhood. Gandhi attempted to reconcile multiple layers of human identity—ranging from the individual and family to the nation and ultimately humanity—within a unified moral framework. For him, these layers were not mutually exclusive but interconnected, forming a hierarchy of

responsibilities. The individual, while important, must be willing to subordinate personal interests for the welfare of the family, and this chain of obligation extends gradually to the village, province, nation, and ultimately the world. In this way, Gandhi located nationalism within a broader philosophy of universalism, suggesting that true patriotism must ultimately serve the cause of humanity rather than narrow self-interest.

Gandhi's reflections on nationalism are most systematically articulated in his influential work *Hind Swaraj*, where he engages with contemporary debates about the nature of the Indian nation. At a time when many argued that India was merely a geographical expression brought together by British rule, Gandhi forcefully rejected this claim. He maintained that India possessed an intrinsic unity long before colonial intervention, rooted in its civilisational ethos. This unity was not political in the modern sense but cultural and moral, sustained by shared traditions, beliefs, and practices. According to Gandhi, the defining feature of Indian civilisation was its remarkable capacity to accommodate diversity, enabling different cultures, religions, and communities to coexist and interact Cooperatively over centuries.

In elaborating this idea, Gandhi placed considerable emphasis on the social and cultural processes that fostered a sense of collective belonging. He highlighted the role of pilgrimage networks and itinerant religious teachers who traversed the subcontinent, connecting distant regions and facilitating interaction among diverse groups. These journeys, often undertaken slowly and with close engagement with local communities, helped to cultivate a shared consciousness among the people. Gandhi believed that such organic forms of interaction were essential to the development of a genuine national community. In contrast, he expressed distrust toward modern technologies like railways, which, although they increased mobility, tended to reduce human interaction to a mechanical and superficial level, thereby weakening the deeper bonds of understanding and accommodation.

Another significant dimension of Gandhi's thought concerns the relationship between religion and nationalism. At a time when religious diversity was often seen as a potential source of division, Gandhi offered a more integrative perspective. He argued that while religions differ in their external practices and social structures, they share a common ethical core that emphasises truth, compassion, and moral duty. By focusing on this shared essence, Gandhi believed it was possible to transcend communal differences and build a cohesive national identity. He firmly rejected the idea that a nation must be culturally or religiously homogeneous, insisting instead that diversity could be a source of strength rather than weakness.

Language, too, occupied an important place in Gandhi's conception of nationhood. While he acknowledged the practical need for a common language to facilitate communication, he was critical of the dominance of English in colonial India. He viewed English not merely as a means of communication but as an instrument of power that created social hierarchies and alienated people from their cultural roots. Gandhi advocated the promotion of indigenous languages and encouraged individuals to learn languages from different regions, thereby fostering mutual understanding. At the same time, he emphasised the importance of preserving and enriching one's mother tongue as a vital component of cultural identity.

Gandhi also examined the role of political institutions and social groups in shaping nationalism, particularly focusing on the Indian National Congress. He regarded the Congress as an important platform that brought together individuals from diverse backgrounds and helped to nurture a sense of national unity. By drawing attention to leaders from different religious communities, he sought to demonstrate the inclusive character of the national movement. However, Gandhi was not uncritical of the Congress. He expressed concern about the growing divide between its moderate and extremist factions, rejecting both excessive caution and violent militancy. While he acknowledged the limitations of the moderates, he strongly opposed the methods of the extremists, arguing that violence would only replicate the oppressive structures of colonial rule. For Gandhi, the means of achieving freedom were as important as the end, and he insisted that true self-rule must be founded on non-violence and moral integrity.

A particularly noticeable aspect of Gandhi's critique is his analysis of the role of modern educated elites in the nationalist movement. He argued that professionals such as lawyers, doctors, and administrators often pursued their own interests under the guise of serving the nation. In his view, these groups were deeply influenced by the values of modern Western civilisation, which prioritised material success and social status over ethical considerations. Gandhi warned that such tendencies could lead to the exploitation of the masses and undermine the very idea of swaraj. As an alternative, he advocated a model of development based on self-sufficiency, decentralisation, and moral regeneration, emphasising the importance of village communities and local governance.

Underlying Gandhi's entire conception of nationalism is a profound critique of modern Western civilisation, which he saw as driven by competition, materialism, and domination. He was particularly wary of attempts to imitate Western models of nation-building, arguing that such efforts would erode India's unique cultural identity and lead to a form of freedom that was merely superficial. Instead, Gandhi envisioned a distinctly Indian form of nationalism that would be rooted in the country's traditions, values, and social realities. This vision emphasised harmony, inclusiveness, and ethical responsibility, offering an alternative to the aggressive and exclusionary forms of nationalism prevalent in many parts of the world.

Core Conflict:

The core conflict between Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi on nationalism lies in their fundamentally different understanding of the nature, purpose, and moral limits of the nation. Gandhi viewed nationalism as a necessary and ethical stage in the moral development of society, where the nation functions as an intermediate unit between the individual and humanity. His idea of an accommodative nation emphasized inclusiveness, cultural pluralism, and moral responsibility, rooted in India's civilizational capacity to absorb diversity. For Gandhi, nationalism was not inherently dangerous; rather, its degeneration into narrowness, exclusiveness, and violence was the real problem. Therefore, he sought to reform nationalism by grounding it in non-violence, ethical conduct, and self-sufficiency, as articulated in Hind Swaraj.

In contrast, Tagore perceived nationalism itself as deeply problematic, particularly in its modern, Western form. He argued that the nation was an artificial and mechanical construct

driven by political and economic interests, which ultimately dehumanizes individuals and fosters conflict, competition, and aggression. Unlike Gandhi, Tagore did not believe nationalism could be morally redeemed; instead, he saw it as inherently prone to exclusion and domination, whether expressed through violence or even through seemingly moral movements like Gandhi's non-cooperation. Tagore's critique, developed in his work *Nationalism*, emphasized the primacy of universal human values over national identity, advocating a form of spiritual internationalism.

Thus, while Gandhi attempted to harmonize nationalism with universal human welfare, Tagore rejected nationalism as a limiting and potentially destructive ideology. Gandhi's vision sought to humanize the nation, whereas Tagore's sought to transcend it altogether, making their disagreement not merely political but deeply philosophical. Because for Tagore- "those people who have got their political freedom are not necessarily free, they are merely powerful."⁽³⁾

Factor	Gandhi	Tagore
1. Independence	Political independence	Beyond political independence
2. Nationalism	Necessary but must be inclusive	Fundamentally dangerous
3. Violence	Strongly opposed	Saw nationalism as inherently violent
4. Religion	Source of unity (core ethics)	Spiritual humanism beyond religion
5. Internationalism	Through nationalism	Beyond nationalism

In my perspective, a balanced and critical perspective would be most appropriate when engaging with the ideas of Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. Rather than choosing one position absolutely, it is more insightful to recognize that both thinkers address different dimensions of nationalism. Gandhi offers a constructive and ethically grounded model of nationalism that is inclusive, rooted in cultural diversity, and oriented towards human welfare. His approach remains valuable in practical nation-building, especially in plural societies like India. On the other hand, Tagore provides a necessary critique by exposing the dangers of nationalism becoming mechanical, exclusionary, and power-driven. His emphasis on universal humanism acts as a moral check against the excesses of nationalism. Therefore, Gandhi's accommodative nationalism with Tagore's humanistic caution, arguing that nationalism should exist but must always remain subordinate to broader ethical and humanitarian principles.

Conclusion:

The ideas of Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore give us two different but important ways of understanding nationalism. Gandhi believed that nationalism is necessary, but it should be based on truth, non-violence, and inclusiveness. For him, a nation should work not only for

itself but also for the welfare of all humanity. On the other hand, Tagore warned that nationalism can become dangerous if it turns mechanical, aggressive, and focused only on power. He believed that human values and universal brotherhood are more important than narrow national identity. A balanced conclusion would be that nationalism should exist, but it must be guided by moral values and humanism. By combining Gandhi's ethical nationalism with Tagore's universal outlook, we can create a form of nationalism that promotes unity, peace, and respect for all people without harming others.

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