

# Competitive Nationalism vs. Cooperative Nationalism: Re-reading Rabindranath Tagore in Times of War

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## Summary

The proposed paper intends to discuss Rabindranath Tagore’s idea of Nationalism and why he is the man the world should look up to for guidance at a time of violence and war threatening to destroy humanity. The proposed paper also intends to identify the loopholes in the traditional theories of Nationalism and to understand the logic behind Tagore’s rejection of the same in favour of a more inclusive and humanistic approach to nationalism. Tagore’s well-known debate with Mahatma Gandhi on the subject of nationalism will also be touched upon in order to highlight the uniqueness of his thoughts.

## Content

“As I look around I see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization... and yet I shall not commit the grievous sin of losing faith in Man” (Tagore 1941) was the unequivocal utterance of a man whose strong faith in the ideals of humanism never quivered, even in the face of an all-sweeping storm of modernism that came along with an extremely powerful philosophy of nationalism in the first half of the twentieth century. It is a well-established practice in the Indian subcontinent to assimilate Tagore into their brand of postcolonialism where his staunch critique of the discourse of nationalism is often rendered as his oppositional attitude towards the European models of nationalism which arose out of the divisive principles of the European Enlightenment. The obvious danger of such reductionist reading of Tagore lies in the fact that this kind of crippled understanding of Tagore’s critique of nationalism leads to the construction of narrow ideological walls which is the hallmark of the traditional discourse of nationalism, against

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which Tagore protested in many of his creative and critical writings including *Nationalism* (1917). A serious problem with the intellectuals who have worked on Tagore's idea of nationalism so far is that they have treated his idea of nationalism as a monolith whereas the truth is his idea of nationalism was always in a state of flux and it did not remain where it was when he had started writing on/reacting to the discourse of nationalism. Having said that, one cannot unaccept the fact that there runs a common strain in all that he wrote on nationalism, and a clear understanding of that common strain is most important in order to effectively understand his otherwise baffling concept of nationalism. Several theories of nationalism have come into being over decades across the globe to analyse the history of nationalism, the rise of the nation-state as a result of man's collective will to call something their own and the interrelation between man and the nation. During the Enlightenment era, an intellectual, as well as cultural, void was created in the minds of the younger generation who unconditionally submitted their faith to the philosophy of Enlightenment which resulted in the breakdown of older social orders causing psychological crisis among the members of the younger generation. This deep psychological crisis, Elie Kedourie believes, had made this generation desperate to look for an alternative space which could provide a sense of stability to them. They finally found the much needed "stability" in a "coherent and stable community" of the "nation" (Kedourie 1960). Ernest Gellner links the rise of nation and the feeling of nationalism to the rise of industrial society. He believes that the ulterior motive behind the formation of the nation-state was to create a nation of citizen-workers. Control over state apparatuses through which to express power is what Karl Deutsch claims to be the criterion by which nationalism transforms itself into "nations". Anderson, in *Imagined Communities*, defines "nation" as "an imagined political community that is both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 1983). In a postcolonial response to Anderson, Partha Chatterjee dismisses the theory of "imagined community" by stating that the theory had originated in the West and can be applied to the western nation-states only as it fails to explain the reality of the "inner domain" of the Asian and the African people which is the basis of anticolonial nationalism. Several other theories have been originated to extend the scope of nationalism, especially following the infamous incident of 9/11, but one thing remains constant in all these apparently contesting theories of nationalism, i.e. the attempt to uphold national identity as something different from the identity of "other". Tagore's objection to this entire discourse of nationalism lies in the attempt to try to project a nation as distinct from all other nations, which is, according to him, the root-cause of violence and war in all ages. Tagore was one of those very few public intellectuals who sought an alternative to the available model of nationalism which would be completely free of "any Enlightenment concept of freedom" and would uphold a "distinctively civilizational concept of nationalism embedded in the tolerance encoded in various traditional ways of life in a highly diverse plural society" (Nandy 1994). A close reading of Tagore's three political novels – *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*), *Gora* (*Gora*) and *Char Adhyay* (*Four Chapters*) –

enables the reader to clearly get the quintessential point of Tagore's unique brand of nationalism which is independent of the influences of the western theories and which shifts the focus completely from competitive nationalism to cooperative nationalism. His famous debate with Mahatma Gandhi on the subject of nationalism bears a clear witness to this. Like a true humanist, in his last public speech – “Crisis in Civilization” – Tagore proudly declares: “A day will come when unvanquished Man will . . . win back his lost human heritage” (Tagore 1941). We all are waiting for that day to come!