

Nikhilesh and Sandeep: The Embodiment of Tagore's Notion of Society and State


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Rabindranath Tagore is a world-renowned poet. But his identity does not end here. Tagore is a poet-lyricist, Tagore is a story-novel-playwright, Tagore is a critic-essayist-philosopher, and even Tagore is a painter. In the present article, the topic of discussion is Rabindranath Tagore's social thought. His socio-political and economic views are our subject of consideration. In the bright light of Rabindranath Tagore's wisdom, various aspects of human civilization and culture have been illuminated. The world poet had thought about various issues of human life and had expressed his opinions in a clear manner. His strong connection with the larger history of the country and the nation is well known. His writings are tireless in transcribing the thoughts and ideas that all these issues created in his mind. The political environment of India was unstable during the emergence of Rabindranath Tagore. In the meantime, he kept himself steadfast and thought about contemporary political events and issues and expressed his opinions. He was in favor of the indivisible unity and solidarity of mankind. Therefore, he published the novel 'Ghore Baire' in 'Sabuj Patrika' about the contemporary situation during the Bengal Partition Movement. While on one hand, Sandeep is a representative of 'state-centric' European civilization; on the other hand, Nikhilesh is seen as a symbol of 'society-centric' Indian civilization. During the period 1910-1925, issues like communalism, imperialism, social reform, and superstition were the central themes of Tagore's socio-political thought. Tagore's independent judgment and in depth conscience were expressed in the discussion of Indian politics. His enthusiasm for establishing the entire country and nation in its own glory before the entire native people is undeniable. Tagore's socio-political thought is a dynamic subject. The existence of contradictory views is observed in his thought. He had a fondness for the calm, gentle, and bright ideals of the ancient Indian asceticism. His sincerity towards the independence of India and the people of India is undeniable. He had guided his long-term political thought by connecting it with the changing trends of life and time. That is why the conflict between good and evil can be seen in the novel 'Ghore Baire' by humanitarian Rabindranath Tagore.

Keywords: rabindranath tagore, swadeshi movement, boycott, atmasakti, indian and european civilizations, society-state

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1. Introduction

In 1905, the Congress split into two factions, extremists and liberals, based on disagreements over the partition of Bengal. Among the extremists of the Congress were the Tagore family; who ignored the British rule and favored self-reliance and self-development. Therefore, Rabindranath Tagore was also attracted to extremist ideology in the early days. The conservative religious practice of the Swadeshi movement also influenced him. But later he moved away from blind patriotism and religious narrowness. According to Tagore, Indian civilization is village-based. Therefore, the main goal of the people of India during the Swadeshi movement should be to take initiative in the reconstruction of the broken, lost villages (Sen 1947: 113). For this reason, Rabindranath emphasized the practice of 'Atmasakti'. The soul of Indian civilization is society. European civilization is state-centered. Conflict is inevitable in civilizational differences. Rabindranath Tagore not only spoke about the practice of 'Atmasakti' a way to liberate the people of India from this turbulent environment; rather, he presented the true form of Indian society before us. In the chapter 'Bharatbarshiya Samaj' of his book 'Atmashakti', Tagore showed the aspects of difference between European civilization and Indian civilization (Tagore 1905: 9).

2. Bharatbarshiya Samaj

He said that the significant foundation of Indian civilization was 'uniting the diverse'. Therefore, this unifying ability was also evident among the people of India. In European civilization, even after the bloodshed of wars and conflicts, those whom civilization had bound together were of the same race. On the other hand, those whom Indian civilization had united were all of different races. This Indian civilization had founded a 'society'; there were no races over the world that had not found a place in it. That is why the Indian society had been able to assimilate all the foreign external forces into it. In India, society is all of above. Society has made us believe in sacrifice instead of getting happiness. On the other hand, in European civilization, consumerism is the ultimate achievement. If we only enjoy what our ancestors have done for us and left behind, then the existential crisis of civilization is inevitable.

Tagore believed that the main duty was to carry forward the work of our ancestors in their absence. In Indian civilization, the king was a part of the society. No one was above the society. It was the duty of the king to consider the interests of the society as his only interest. The king always kept an eye on the welfare of the society.

Tagore believed that this consciousness is absent in present times. The sacrifices made by our ancestors for the welfare of the entire society must be reawakened. Our good deeds lie in providing education, health and food to the society. It is our responsibility to view it as welfare and virtue rather than as a business. In this civilization, the only way to attain humanity is to bind people from all walks of life in a great bond of selfless welfare.

3. Swadeshi Samaj

In the chapter on 'Swadeshi Samaj', Tagore lamented that before the arrival of the British, our society had solved all the problems like water scarcity itself. On the other hand, the king had handled matters such as war, state defense, and judicial affairs. Before that, society did not wait for alien help and was not ruined because of that. Nowadays, the mind of man has shifted from society to external forces. If the flow of the river changes its course, then the villages and towns of the past are destroyed. That is exactly the condition of man now. In this chapter, Tagore drew a distinction between European state power and Indian social power.

He said that what is called 'state' in English; in India it is the name of 'society'. In Europe, the responsibility of the people rests with the state. The state power in India is relatively independent. The subjects are bound by social duties. The work of society falls on everyone in society. We call this consciousness responsibility. Our responsibility is to practice restraint of interests and self-sacrifice. We are all obliged to fulfill this liability. That is why if the state power is overthrown in Europe, the destruction of the entire country is inevitable. That is why 'politics' is more important in Europe. In the same way, if the society in our country is crippled, we will also be destroyed. Therefore, just as the English are eager to save their state, we must also try to save our society. European civilization had struck at the foundation of our society.

Eventually, we had handed over all the duties of society to external forces one by one through our own efforts. Even our social customs were trying to be bound by the laws of the English. As a result; a new Hindu society had emerged that time, new customs and procedures had been introduced too. Hindu society was forced to accept those practices. Our heart had become uncovered, uninhibited and broken meanwhile (Tagore 1905: 23).

4. Ghore Baire

In view of this situation, Tagore published the novel 'Ghore Baire' in 'Sabuj Patrika' in 1916. Where, on the one hand, Sandeep was portrayed as a representative of the state-centered European civilization, and on the other hand, Nikhilesh was portrayed as a symbol of the society-centered Indian civilization.

Nikhilesh was a liberal-minded man of the time. He believed that women's education was essential for society. So, to educate his wife in modern education, he gave her western music lessons from Miss Gilby. Nikhilesh was the first in his family who in addition to being educated in western education was also a supporter of the Swadeshi movement. Nikhilesh was a rich and influential landlord of Sukhsayor. Sandeep was Nikhilesh's college friend and a staunch supporter of the Swadeshi movement. Sandeep arrived at Nikhilesh's Sukhsayor with the intention of wreaking havoc in the name of the Swadeshi movement. The Swadeshi movement began in 1905 in the wake of opposition to Lord Curzon's proposed partition of Bengal. In protest against this, the Swadeshi activists initiated the people of Bengal into the practice of 'accepting the natives and boycotting the foreigners'. Nikhilesh's Sukhsayor market was used to buy and sell foreign goods. Sandeep appeared there with his team with the aim of destroying all that. On the other hand, Nikhilesh was a peace-loving man. He did not hesitate to sacrifice himself for the welfare of the common people. Through this novel, Tagore showed us how the turmoil surface of the Swadeshi movement that endangered the lives of the common people. The Swadeshi activists threw stones at the head of Nikhilesh's wife Bimala's Western music instructor Miss Gilby angered by the brutality of movement. As a result, she was forced to leave Sukhsayor.

Nikhilesh was a generous person; he always tried to ensure that his wife Bimala could live her life according to her own wishes. On the other hand, the staunch Swadeshi Sandeep was seen pursuing his own interests in the name of the Swadeshi movement. He forced Bimala to join the Swadeshi movement. Not only that, through Bimala, he was eager to attack Nikhilesh's ideals and carry out destructive riots in Sukhsayor. Nikhilesh knew that although the purpose with which the Swadeshi movement was started was useful, the form it had taken now; only the common people of Bengal would be harmed by it. Since foreign goods were cheap in those days, it was easy for the poor people of Bengal to buy and sell them and that was their livelihood.

The Swadeshi movement had become increasingly unaffordable for the common people of Bengal. Therefore, Nikhilesh would not allow any harm to the people of Sukhsayor. When Nikhilesh got in the way of Sandeep's unjust demands, Sandeep's Swadeshi party turned into brutality. They set fire to all the houses in the village. The foreign goods that came to Sukhsayor by boats for sale; in the darkness of the night, the agitators sank those boats. Above all, in the interest of fulfilling the whims of the British state power; the indigenous agitators instigated communal riots throughout the village. Nikhilesh had to sacrifice his life to save the people of the village. On the other hand, Sandeep, in the emotion of the indigenous movement, burned the entire village to the ground and fled from Sukhsayor.

Rabindranath Tagore was indeed involved in direct politics for a few days during the Swadeshi movement. When the entire Bengal was in turmoil after the announcement of the policy of partition of Bengal; Tagore had written several inspiring Swadeshi songs and enthused the entire Bengali nation. When the Carlyle Circular was published in 1905, schools and colleges run by the British government were boycotted and when the 'National Council of Education' was formed for Swadeshi education; he also led it. In other words, Tagore's relationship was established in all aspects of the Swadeshi movement. But it cannot be said that he was in harmony with the main stream of this movement everywhere. There were differences of opinion and perspective at every step.

Here Tagore drew a clear distinction between state power and social power. There is an addiction to the madness of state power. Those who had never thought about the motherland had not worked for the country; in order to make them fulfill such a big responsibility as the Swadeshi movement, they needed to be addicted. There was no other way. Nikhilesh did not believe in any kind of addiction. Rather, for him, society was all of above. On the other side, for Sandeep, the end was important no matter what the means were. As a result, the lives of the public may be disrupted. In particular, Sandeep is the embodiment of the 'machine of exploitation' called the state here. Tagore had repeatedly spoken about the core essence of Indian society; where society talked about abstinence, not about emotion. Society talked about renunciation, not about enjoyment; where renunciation is considered as 'religion'. There Sandeep was a dedicated worker and leader of the Swadeshi movement; unable to give up the addiction of imported cigarettes. Where the purpose of his coming to Sukhsayor was to boycott foreign goods, yet he said that that was impossible to him to smoke those domestic branded cigarettes which made him apathetic (Tagore 1926: 34).

In other words, it could not be said that Sandeep's Swadeshi movement was a substitute for patriotism. Sandeep gave more importance to his own charm under the pretext of serving the country. He did not travel by train except in first class. On the other hand, Nikhilesh, despite being the landlord of Sukhsayor, was always ready to protect the village from the clutches of the Swadeshi movement, thinking about the plight of the villagers. In this way, Tagore, through Nikhilesh, instilled 'Atmasakti' in the minds of the people. Tagore believed that the importance and effectiveness of society was much greater than the state. Therefore, if we were going to create a state that provided public welfare, it was very necessary to first develop social consciousness.

In the novel *Ghore Baire*, Tagore emphasized several socio-political issues, such as Bimala's departure from the inner palace, Western music education, and an open discussion in a Western-style manner with her husband Nikhilesh on whether indigenous products should be burned. Moreover, there are the two dialectical characters, one is Nikhilesh and on the other is Sandeep. One is a part of the world consciousness, a symbol of human welfare, an eternal truth.

The other one is a representative of the fragmented present and a powerful dynamic reality. For Sandeep, the country was nothing but a map. By structuring a statue of the mother of this country, he wanted to captivate the country with the voice of 'Vande Mataram'. But for that, he did not hesitate to oppress the people of the motherland. But Nikhilesh considered the liberation of the people of the country more important than worshipping the country as a mother. That liberation was not just the transfer of power from the hands of the British to the people of the motherland. It was all-round liberation; liberation from illiteracy, hunger, and superstition. He could not accept the oppression of the poor people of the country in the name of freedom. He could not accept conspiring with his own people in the name of the country, killing people without hesitation. Nikhilesh could not let himself be swept away by the air around him like Sandeep. In the eyes of Sandeep, the country was his emotion, so he would be fascinated by his motherland. He wanted a direct form of the country that he could call her mother, goddess, Durga, to whom he would sacrifice an animal and bathe it in blood. Even if this sacrificial animal was a poor person of his country, it did not matter. According to Sandeep, the people of the country had to suffer this much for the independence of their motherland. But Nikhilesh was not a supporter of any kind of oppression. For Nikhilesh, the motherland was not just a formed idol. The people of the country are the motherland or it can be said that the motherland is for the people, not the people for the motherland.

Sandeep, a staunch soldier of the Swadeshi movement, influenced by foreign science, spoke of man's own survival through the power of his own body. He said, "Whatever has come to me is mine; this is what the incapable say and the weak listen to. Whatever I can take away is rightfully mine. This is the lesson of the whole world. We are carnivorous creatures of the world. We have teeth, claws, we can run, catch, tear. We cannot spend our days eating grass in the morning and chewing it till evening. Therefore, even if you, the opposing group, stand guard at the door of the food system we have in the world; we cannot. We will either steal or rob" (Tagore 1926: 65).

5. Conclusion

Going beyond Western realism, Rabindranath Tagore did not stop at expressing his objections to the abstraction of the concept of Indian civilization.

He found his Indian civilization in the harsh reality of the lives of the poor, destitute, and diseased people of the country. The Indian civilization for which he asked the countrymen to be active is not an idealized image of India, but the real India of the poor, needy people. He never expected that the traditional society of India would be able to meet all the needs of the people of modern India (Tagore 2015: 52) He did not put the burden of fulfilling the artificial needs that this capitalist mechanistic civilization had created and was doing in India on the indigenous society. But he was confident that this society would meet the natural biological needs of the day. Rabindranath considered the intervention of the state to be completely unnecessary to fulfill all these needs. According to him, in ancient Indian civilization, society could have performed these tasks very easily and smoothly. In fact, he wanted to feel the core of the country's 'Atmasakti' at this great moment of the Swadeshi movement.

One of the main issues of the Swadeshi movement was 'boycott'. Foreign goods, foreign education, foreign administration, everything had to be boycotted. Swadeshim had to be created in all spheres of life. Initially, Tagore supported this course of action of boycott. But after some time, he withdrew from the boycott. It can be said that he became against the boycott. According to most historians, Tagore became against the boycott only when the communal riots between Hindus and Muslims took a complex shape centered on the boycott. In fact, from the beginning, Tagore's view on the boycott was somewhat unique. For the liberals, the only goal of the boycott was to draw the attention of the British to the grievances of Bengal (Bharthi 1998: 29). If the partition of Bengal was revoked and those grievances were removed, the boycott would also be withdrawn. For the moderates, the boycott was a temporary tactic. On the other hand, for the extremists, the boycott was a way to gain full independence. Tagore's idea of boycott was not to be an act of anger or stubbornness towards the British, but rather to love the country, to use domestic industrial products and therefore to deprive oneself of foreign consumer goods. Here, Tagore did not give importance to boycott as an external political tool from a negative perspective; rather, he saw it as a way to increase the nation's self-confidence and create national unity through 'practicing Atmasakti'.

But when boycott became a matter of leaders' orders and coercion, losing its natural spontaneity, then Tagore became opposed to boycott. And the severe deterioration of Hindu-Muslim relations due to the coercive movement made him feel sad. The reflection of which can be seen in his novel 'Ghore Baire'.

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