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Chakraborty (review)

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India

TAGORE AND NATIONALISM (e-book). Edited by K. L. Tuteja and Kaustav Chakraborty. New Delhi: Springer, 2017. xiv + 379 pp.

The volume, *Tagore and Nationalism*, edited by K. L. Tuteja and Kaustav Chakraborty, presents a broad gamut of works by scholars from universities in India, Bangladesh, Scotland, and Italy. As the preface articulates, the conversations around Tagore's contribution to the discourse of nationalism emerged out of a critical need "to be inspired by Tagore's unshaken faith on the essential goodness of humankind that would restore the 'human' to this desolated world of antagonists and combatants" (p. vii) at a time when "the world seems to be getting fragmented by the fundamentalist designer of the narrow walls" (p. vii).

Part I has eight chapters, each looking at a specific site of ambivalence. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya introduces the idea of "antinomies" in Tagore's nationalism, the jostling between a state and a society, between competition, and cooperation, where he considers a nation-state to be a mechanical organization, as opposed to a society, which has a more organic character. While Bhattacharya establishes the evolving nature of Tagore's ideologies, Krishna Sen defends Tagore's nationalism by pointing out the coexistence of Anglophilia and a disdain for the colonial state, ascribing it to Tagore's "multistranded background" (p. 35).

Citing from Tagore's essay, "Nation ki?," Sukanta Chaudhuri notes Tagore chooses to retain the English word in the title of his essay due to his inability of finding a Bengali equivalent term. Chaudhuri explains that unlike the Western concept of a militant power-hungry nation-state, and the disjuncture between "private morality" and "public expediency" that it necessitates, for Tagore, the "political *is* the ethical" (p. 69).

Tilottama Misra offers a critique of the limitations in Tagore's views of linguistic nationalism and echoes Krishna Sen on differences between an "English Tagore" and a "Bengali Tagore" (p. 32). Misra points out that despite promoting notions of inclusion and diversity in his English essays and international lectures, one cannot overlook the exclusions of India's Northeastern states—even "in his well-known

paean to the ‘ruler of India’s destiny (*Jana Gana Mana Adhinayaka*)’” (p. 54). Taking this argument further, Misra points out how his 1898 Bengali essay “Bhasha-Bichhed,” meant primarily for the emerging Bengali elites, supports a kind of colonial modernity that reinforces the evolutionary theory of languages and merging of “weaker languages” with “stronger ones” (p. 56).

While Makarand R. Paranjape reminds us that Tagore restated the difference between a nation-state and social organization in his essays and lectures, R. Siva Kumar illustrates the making of a community as an example of vernacular nationalism through the example of Santiniketan.¹ Tagore addressed the urban-rural divide and the “race problem” through indigenous education, reconstruction of village life, focus on nature, arts, and humanities, with the vision of making Santiniketan “national in aspect, international in spirit” (p. 95).

K. Satchidanandan mentions the possibility that Tagore, foreseeing the rise of Hindu nationalism, was critical of a nation built purely on Hindutva values, while simultaneously being skeptical of “heartless globalization” (p. 119). Offering examples from Tagore’s poems in the 1916 volume of *Balaka*, his political novels *Chaturanga*, *Ghare Baire*, and *Gora*, and his 1922 verse poems from *Lipika*, Fakrul Alam concludes Part I with his essay pointing the readers to Tagore’s “alternative modernism” (p. 129), which celebrates experimentations with form, modernist techniques of narrative perspectives and a constantly evolving and enlarging sense of self.

Part II explores relationships of national identity, Hindu culture and religion, and literature. Supriya Chaudhuri’s essay identifies the gaps in Benedict Anderson’s established relationship between a novel and a nation (in his *Imagined Communities*), arguing, while invoking Ranajit Guha, that subaltern communities are not included in this print-culture-led “imagination.” Again citing *Ghare Baire* and *Gora* as examples, Chaudhuri proves Tagore’s refusal of this correlation established by Anderson, as Tagore puts “notions of self and nation to the test” (p. 145), inevitably creating for the readers a “profound, inalienable feeling of self-difference, a state of openness, receptivity, and estrangement” (p. 156). Bhaskar Chakrabarty traces the evolution of Tagore’s thoughts on the West, the West-East relationship, and the role of India in creating a hegemonic vision of Hindu colonialism in Southeast Asia through an exploration of his travel writings such as *Europe Provasir Patra* (1879), *Europe Yatrir Diary* (1890), *Pather Sanchay* (1912–1913), *Java Yatrir Patra* (1927), and *Parasye* (1932).

Examining caste, religion, sectarianism, religious fundamentalism, and the associated questions of purity, Kaustav Chakrabarty analyses four short stories from Tagore’s collection *Galpa Guchha*—

Prayaschitto, *Sanksar*, *Tyag*, and *Mussalmanir Galpo*, critically comparing Tagore's nuanced stance with that of spiritual stalwarts of the time such as Aurobindo and Vivekananda, both of whom had openly expressed their vision of a Hindu nation.

Biraj Mehta Rathi analyses cosmopolitanism, nationalism, and gender in Tagore's novels, *Ghare Baire* and *Chaar Adhyay*, problematizing Tagore's position through the lens of Levinas' ideas on inclusion and othering. Not only is it not explained why such a comparative lens is applied, the argument itself is based on a flawed premise and a misreading of Tagore's position. Rathi conflates Nikhilesh's limitations with Tagore's, and misinterprets Tagore's ambivalence and skepticism toward both militant nationalism as well as a vague cosmopolitanism, as several contributors in this volume have already established (such as in Chapters 3, 5, 8, and 10). Rathi does not sufficiently elucidate his inference that the novel is "Tagore's project of cosmopolitanism" (p. 191).

Rathi's analysis of *Chaar Adhyay* also needs refining. Comparing the characters of Bimala (in *Ghare Baire*) and Ela (in *Chaar Adhyay*), he concludes "Ela's sacrifice, on the other hand, is chosen out of love for Atin, a willing emotional submissiveness and thus a genuine glorious act of freedom" (p. 193). Even though Rathi is ascribing more agency to Ela, critical engagement with works such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" would have added more nuance to this conclusion.² This chapter also needs a more fine-tooth-comb copy-editing to avoid incomplete sentences, syntactical, and typographical errors.

Part III begins with a comparative analysis of Premchand's evolving ideas of nationalism that culminate into a form of ardent Gandhism, Tagore's evolving relationship with the *swadeshi* movement, and his relationship with Gandhi. Harish Trivedi explicates the competing significance of the languages Bengali and Hindi, the gendering (Hindi being presumed to be masculine, and Bengali as feminine in social consciousness even until 1960s), and linguistic politics around these two languages.

Rukmini Bhaya Nair looks closely at works by Tagore and Ludwig Wittgenstein to evaluate the relationship among language, nation, and freedom; while for Tagore "freeing Bengali turns out to be a metaphor for freeing India" (p. 230), Wittgenstein's notion seems to be that of "correct language, correct nation" (p. 239). Bashabi Fraser identifies four stages of relationship between Gandhi and Tagore, and traces their ongoing debate on the nature of nationalism. Fraser concludes that despite their differences, the two men "converged on the underlying tenets of Truth and Love, which embodied for them the Spirit of the Indian nation" (p. 255). Sukumar Muralidharan, on the other

hand, explores this relationship against the question of caste and Ambedkar's role in providing a fresh perspective in this debate, warning us against the limitations, exclusions, and iniquities of tradition. Chhanda Chatterjee explores Tagore's use of Guru Gobind Singh as the figure of a nationalist hero to inspire the youth, by writing for the youth magazine, *Balak*; Swagata Kumar Bose compares similar thoughts on spirituality and universal humanism propagated by Tagore (on the verge of India attaining freedom from the colonial British power) and by Miguel de Unamuno (in the cusp of Spain losing all its colonies). Stefano Beggiora interprets Tagore's experiences in Italy, his meeting with Mussolini, his subsequent condemnation of fascism, and simultaneous expression of the "love and gratitude for the people of Italy" (p. 306).

The first two chapters (by Pathik Roy and Manas Ghosh) in the concluding part, Part IV, examine the rendition of Tagore's novel *Chokher Bali* in Rituparno Ghosh's film, and the invocation of Tagore's style, aesthetics, and ideology in Ritwick Ghatak's films on Partition, respectively. The last two chapters of this volume (by Saurav Dasthakar and Aishika Chakraborty) demonstrate the depth and breadth of Tagore's unique musical and dance forms that transcend the strict rigidities of capitalistic notions of productivity and what was classified as the "classical," and therefore separated from a nation-building bourgeois cultural project.

While Part I in this volume seems repetitive, and could have combined a few chapters with co-authorship, Part III, which adopts a comparative lens, seems incomplete without sufficient research on Ambedkar and the subaltern Dalit perspective (even though Chapter 18 includes Ambedkar's views, it seems rather inadequate compared to the discussions on Gandhi and Tagore).

The absence of discourse on Tagore's dramatic works is a striking omission in this volume—besides a fleeting mention of Tagore's play, *Taasher Desh*, in the preface (p. vii), none of the chapters explores Tagore's significant contribution to the dramatic arts. Several of his plays (such as *Visarjan*, *Chandalika*, *Raktakarabi*, *Taasher Desh*, and *Muktadhara*) examine questions of class, caste, religion, gender, and social justice, among others, which ultimately point toward the freedom of the spirit against the organized power of the state, machine, or dogmatic tradition and organized religion, which could have been appropriately incorporated in both Part II and Part IV of this volume.

Such a sizable collection of essays employing diverse perspectives by authors from varied backgrounds is bound to be uneven in terms of consistency of scope, style, language, and tone. But this volume is critical, topical, and even indispensable, in our contemporary

times, when voices of dissent are considered “antinational” even in a democracy threatened by narrow factionalism, communalism, inequalities in race, class, caste, and gender. Despite polyphonic voices adopted by this volume, there is an underlying theme unifying Tagore’s views on nationalism—that of an essential everyday humanitarianism.

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NOTES

1. Santiniketan is a university town in Birbhum district of West Bengal. It was originally founded in 1863 as a guest house by Devendranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore’s father. After his father’s death in 1941, Rabindranath Tagore took over the responsibilities of Santiniketan, and developed it as a university town. Please see, W. W. Pearson, *Shantiniketan: The Bolpur School of Rabindranath Tagore* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916).

2. G. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, revised edition, from the “History” chapter of *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. In *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 21–78.

Southeast Asia

MAK YONG: WORLD HERITAGE THEATRE. By Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof. Penang: Areca Books, 2019. 160 pp. \$30.95.

MAK YONG THROUGH THE AGES: KELANTAN’S TRADITIONAL DANCE THEATRE. By Ghulam-Sawar Yousof. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 2018. 106 pp. \$12.00.

Ghulam-Sawar Yousof ends *Mak Yong: World Heritage Theatre* hoping the book “will contribute to the revival of authentic Mak Yong and bring national and global attention to this world heritage theatre” (p. 111). For Ghulam “authentic” means the village-based performances of the early-mid twentieth century. Since 1969, when Ghulam first saw the