Tagore's Early Twentieth Century International Thought

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Endeavours to deprovincialize the discipline of International Relations (IR) including the embrace of global IR (Acharya and Buzan 2019), the recovery of neglected and erased political figures' international thought (e.g., Owens, Rietzler, Hutchings and Dunstan 2022; Kapila 2021; Vitalis 2015), and the turn to literature as a site of international theorising (e.g. Hunt 2022; Mrovlje 2017) have collectively served to create space for a renewed focus on Rabindranath Tagore's contribution to IR. Rabindranath Tagore was a Bengali polymath who described himself as a confluence of many cultures. After becoming the Nobel Laureate in Literature in 1913, he acquired the status of an international celebrity and traversed multiple political circles. In many ways, then, he was no marginal figure. Scholarship on Tagore's life and works have long flourished in South Asia (e.g., Chakravarty and Chaudhuri 2017; Tuteja and Chakraborty 2017; Puri 2015; Haque 2010). A few prominent political theorists offer close and compelling engagements with his work (Berlin 2019; Nussbaum 2015; Sen 2006). Yet, but for some notable exceptions (e.g., Shani 2022; Devare 2018; Rao 2010), Tagore remains largely understudied in IR. This article seeks to redress this by offering a brief introduction to Tagore and contextualising and situating his early twentieth century international thought in the IR lexicon.

A Myriad Minded Man

Rabindranath Tagore was born on 7 May 1861 to Sharada Devi and Debendranath Tagore in Calcutta (present day Kolkata). At the heart of the Bengal Renaissance, the Tagores were the first family of Bengal (Vajpeyi 2012). Rabindranath's grandfather 'Prince' Dwarkanath Tagore was a trader, banker and philanthropist who was a guest of Queen Victoria and King Louis Phillipe. His father, 'Maharshi' (Great Sage) Debendranath Tagore co-founded the religious reform movement, Brahmoism (Dutta and Robinson 1997; Collins 2012). Among Tagore's many accomplished family members were the mathematician, philosopher, and poet, Dwijendranath Tagore, the first Bengali woman novelist, Swarnakumari Tagore, the artist and founder of the Bengal School of Art, Abanindranath Tagore, and the woman of letters, Kadambari Devi (Dutta and Robinson 1997).

Growing up in this immensely creative environment profoundly shaped Tagore's development. It more than compensated for his unconventional formal education which included brief and often unsuccessful stints at four schools, and later, University College London. Indeed, in 1913, Tagore became the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. In 1915, in recognition of his services to Literature, he was awarded a knighthood. In 1940, the University of Oxford conferred him with an honorary doctorate. Upon gaining independence, India and Bangladesh adopted his compositions as national anthems. Less celebrated – but no less significant – were his ecological or 'rural reconstruction' initiatives at Sriniketan, and the founding of his global university, Visva Bharati. The former influenced both the government of India's development practices and inspired the formation of Dartington Trusts (Dutta and Robinson 1997), while the latter was dedicated to the study of humanity and had among its many visitors, the International Relations scholar, Merze Tate (Vitalis 2015). Tagore, then, was a myriad minded man: he was a poet, author, artist, composer, ecologist, educator, and a political figure.

In India, Tagore is celebrated alongside Mohandas Gandhi, Motilal Nehru, and Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar as a founding father of the Indian Republic (Vajpeyi 2012). Indeed, he captured the South Asian political imagination at more than one key moment in the anti-imperial struggle. His involvement in the *swadeshi* movement and his renunciation of his knighthood perhaps best exemplify this. In the early 1900s, Tagore was at the helm of *swadeshi*

or own country movement that followed the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon's proposed partition of Bengal. An important juncture in the history of decolonization, the *swadeshi* movement entrenched an economic critique of empire and a moral commitment to 'swaraj' (self-rule) and 'atmashakti' (self-reliance) (Goswami 2004). On Partition Day, Tagore invited Bengalis to take to the streets in protest tying *rachis* – or ritual threads representing fraternity – around each other's wrists. Characteristic of Tagore's commitment to universalism, he paid no heed to distinctions of caste or creed and tied *rachis* on the wrists of those he encountered that day including the mullahs at the local mosque. Ezra Pound once quipped that Tagore sang Bengal into a nation, and the songs he composed during this period were adopted by nationalists and revolutionaries in the anti-imperial struggle. Beyond such cultural and artistic contributions – and even as he distanced himself from the *swadeshi* movement's violent turn – Tagore remained steadfast in his commitment to what Sumit Sarkar (2013) terms a 'constructive swadeshi' programme that prioritised, for instance, self-reliance (atmashakti), indigenous education, and rural reform.

In 1919, following the Amritsar massacre – where the British Indian army opened fire on a large crowd of unarmed protesters killing and injuring hundreds – Tagore felt compelled, once again, to enter the political fray. He wrote to Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, to renounce his knighthood. Tagore's powerful indictment of imperial violence remains resonant today:

Considering that such treatment has been meted out to a population, disarmed and resourceless, by a power which has the most terribly efficient organisation for destruction of human lives, we must strongly assert that it can claim no political expedience, far less moral justification. (As cited in Dutta and Robinson 1997, 216)

Seeking to stand in solidarity with the masses, he added:

The time has come when badges of honour make our shame glaring in their incongruous context of humiliation, and I for my part wish to stand shorn of all special distinctions, by the side of those of my countrymen who for their so-called insignificance, are liable to suffer a degradation not fit for human beings'(As cited in Dutta and Robinson 1997, 216).

Tagore, however, was also an important international political figure. At a time when international travel was rare, he visited the United States, Latin America, the Middle East, North and Southeast Asia, Russia and Europe, speaking among other things about war, nationalism, race, caste, and imperialism. Some of the many remarkable figures he conversed or corresponded with included Jane Addams, Benedetto Croce, W.E.B. DuBois, Gilbert Murray, Okakura Tenshin, and W.B. Yeats. However, as Amartya Sen (2006) notes, there is a certain dissonance between how Tagore was received and remembered in South Asia and the West. The Western image of Tagore as an unworldly mystic, for instance, bore little resemblance to Tagore the social critic who offered trenchant commentaries on social hierarchies, cultural chauvinism, and the status of women. Consequently, the many parallels between Tagore's political work at home and in the world have been either ignored or misunderstood. Tagore's involvement in the *swadeshi* movement, then, did not so much end in 1907 as much as it acquired a 'travelling' and 'internationalist' dimension thereafter (Manjapra 2012).

When Tagore embarked on his global travels in 1912 with the intention of fostering what has been termed 'a politics of friendship' (Collins 2012; Gandhi 2006), he began a tradition of '*swadeshi* internationalism' (Manjapra 2012). Grounded in a normative commitment to the transformative potential of encounter, dialogue, and love, this mode of worldmaking *during* empire sought to dislocate imperial hierarchy and dominance. Tagore's renunciation of his knighthood in 1919, similarly, was not so much an isolated instance of anti-imperial fervour as much as it was the culmination of a caustic critique of the co-constitution of 'the imperial' and 'the national', which formed the subject of his 1916 and 1917 lectures on nationalism in the U.S. and Japan. While the failure to recognise these parallels between Tagore's political work at home and in the world reveals – as Sen (2006) suggests – something of the Orientalism of IR, it also places Tagore in the company of a much-misunderstood set of IR thinkers: early twentieth century idealists.

An Early Twentieth Century Idealist?

To seek to situate Tagore among IR's early twentieth century idealists is to enter contentious terrain. Indeed, an expansive body of historical scholarship calls into question the merit of such categorisations. Largely the product of E.H. Carr's (2016) polemic, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939,* the term 'idealist' has long been hurled as a pejorative and understood chiefly as the antithesis of a 'realist'. This is because in Carr's rendering, realists privilege politics, while idealists emphasise ethics. These distinct commitments, for him, manifest themselves in distinct orientations and engagements with the world. Thus, while, realists foreground 'thinking', 'determinism' and 'causality', idealists foreground 'wishing', 'voluntarism' and 'creativity' (Carr 2016). It is not hard to see how idealism as a category for approaching international thought is fraught with ambiguity. As Lucian Ashworth (2006, 295) elaborates:

There is no agreement about what idealism is (is it an attribute of realism, a mode of thought along with realism, or a separate paradigm?), what it stood for (is it a belief in institutions, or a common morality, or justice, or reason, or science?), where it lay on the political spectrum (conservative, liberal, socialist, or moralistic pacifist?) or when it existed (pre-1914, 1920s, 1930s or 1940s).

Further, to engage with the thought of an 'IR idealist' is to reach the realisation that 'they were not as naïve in their assumptions, as simplistic in their analysis, nor as uniform in their outlook as received wisdom suggests' (Wilson 2003, vi). Notwithstanding the merit of these critiques, exploring whether Tagore's early twentieth century thought was idealist confers some benefits. It helps situate his thought in a concatenation of ideas about the early twentieth century 'international' and offers a conceptual frame that allows us to compare and contrast his thought with that of other international political figures. If the former helps us understand Tagore's reception in the context of the discipline's broader dismissal of progressive thought, the latter helps us distil what was distinctive about Tagore's contribution to IR.

Beyond Carr's calumny, idealism's key tenets would seem to include an emphasis on 'voluntarism'; 'faith in reason'; 'belief in a universal standard of morality'; 'faith in the efficacy of public opinion', and 'a belief in the natural harmony of interests' (Wilson 2003, 17). As Peter Wilson (2003) elaborates, these tenets are inextricably linked and find expression in idealism's pacific impulse. If a faith in rationality, for instance, impels the desire to understand the causes of war, a faith in universal morality offers the normative basis to address it. Both are predicated on a belief in the transformative potential of the human will. This animates a faith in public opinion, evident in a commitment to education and institutions. Together, they signal a belief in a natural harmony of interests; a quasi-cosmopolitan impulse that sees no inherent tension between internationalism and nationalism, or the universal and the particular. In the IR imaginary, idealism finds its exemplar in the former U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. As others have established, however, idealism – or, more aptly, the circulation of ideas it conjures – was neither the invention of Wilson nor the West (e.g. Ashworth 2021; Frost 2012).

While Tagore's political views altered with time, his *swadeshi* internationalist writings betray several affinities with IR's early twentieth century idealism. Tagore had an abiding faith in humanity and its redemptive capacity for reason and right action. Perhaps this is most powerfully expressed in his final essay, 'Crisis of Civilisation', dictated only a few weeks before his death in 1941:

As I look around, I see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization strewn like a vast heap of futility. And yet I shall not commit the grievous sin of losing faith in Man. I would rather look forward to opening a new chapter in his history after the cataclysm is over and the atmosphere is rendered clean with the spirit of service and sacrifice (Tagore 1941).

Although Tagore had heterodox views on religion, this faith in humanity was grounded in an Upanishadic universalism that attested to the unity of all creation.[3] As he elaborates in his 1913 essays, *Sadhana,* love is freedom and fulfilment in this non-anthropocentric unity. It helps us comprehend that the 'separateness of our self…has no intrinsic reality of its own' (Das 2008a, 310). Importantly, for Tagore, this 'unity' was predicated on 'multiplicity' or diversity. Consequently, there was no contradiction between 'the universal' and 'the particular'. However, ego and ignorance (*avidya*) cloud our capacity to comprehend this inherent interconnectedness of all creation. They manifest in a distinct mode of loving (Hartnett 2022) – abstract, idealised, rigid and instrumental – that makes our friendships 'exclusive, our families selfish and inhospitable, our nations insular and aggressively inimical to other races' (Das

2008a, 292). This mode of loving lay at the heart of violence. By fostering intercultural dialogue and founding a global university for the study of humanity, Tagore sought to remediate this. Beyond these commitments to voluntarism, his belief in universalism and a natural harmony of interests, his faith in reason and the efficacy of public opinion, what situates Tagore among IR's early twentieth century idealists is his high regard for the U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. Tagore, in fact, sought (unsuccessfully) to have his pacific, anti-imperial tract, 'Nationalism' dedicated to the U.S. President in 1917.

Idealism, however, is ultimately an artifice, and Tagore's thought differed from many of his contemporaries on important themes including nationalism, empire, and the League of Nations. Unlike many of the so-called idealists who articulated some commitment to the nation, Tagore was highly critical of nationalism and opted instead for a vision of Pan-Asianism that resisted IR's Westphalian logics (Shani 2022; Dayal 2007). To a large extent, this was because Tagore saw the nation as a mirror image of empire (Mehta 2003). Both ultimately elevate abstract loves of imagined communities populated not by individuals in their complex particularity but idealized constructions (Hartnett 2022). Consequently, they embody violent logics. While a growing body of literature seeks to reclaim Tagore's critique in service of postcolonial nation-building, the fact remains that Tagore stretches the notion of a nation to its breaking point. As evident in his 1910 novel, *Gora* – which can be read as a counter-narrative to Rudyard Kipling's 1901 novel *Kim* – Tagore (2014, 502) imagines an Irish foundling born during the 1857 War of Independence (Sepoy Mutiny) with "no mother, no father, no country, no caste, no name, no family gotra (lineage), no deity" find himself at home in India. This radically inclusive, post-racial, post-casteized, post-religious construction of "a nation" arguably foreshadows – another leading idealist – Alfred Zimmern's (1923) description of a nation neither as a "state nor church nor race nor geographical or linguistic unity" but rather as a "body of people united by a corporate sentiment of particular intensity, intimacy and dignity, related to a definite home country".

However, whereas Zimmern's idea of a nation was hospitable to imperial formations (Hartnett 2023), for Tagore this was anathema. Indeed, while Tagore may have only become a vociferous advocate of Indian independence in the latter half of his life, he was a lifelong critic of empire. These reservations set Tagore apart from the Asian millenarian moment that had among its luminaries, Lim Boon Keng in China, Armand de Souza in Colombo, and Annie Besant in India (Frost 2012). Many of these individuals, like Tagore, espoused a new world order predicated on love and universalism. However, they largely saw empire as hospitable to nationalist and internationalist hopes, while Tagore did not (Frost 2012). Tagore's critique of the League of Nations – which he described as a "League of Vagabonds" – is best understood in this light. For Tagore, the League of Nations was but the British Empire reconstructed. It embodied the violent logics of nationalism and imperialism rather than universal love. As he eloquently put it, "A new machine will be of little advantage if it be run by the old power for old ends. Organisation is not brotherhood…" (Das 2008b, 736).

Tagore, like many great thinkers, was not quite consistent. To engage with his oeuvre, then, is to encounter many Tagores. In the span of the early twentieth century alone, he led the *swadeshi* movement, retreated from it to engage in (auto) critique, before embarking on a global journey championing *swadeshi* internationalism. In this period, Tagore envisaged a globe without nations or empires. This rare blend of globalism, anti-imperialism and anti-nationalism was grounded in a normative commitment to love and universalism. It led him to critique of the violent logics of empires and nations, and to bequeath a vision of a radically inclusive, non-Westphalian world untethered to caste, colour, and creed. Anti-imperialism was to become commonplace in the mid-twentieth century even as empire persisted in other forms. Nations, similarly, were to be embraced as the norm. For a brief moment, however, Tagore sought to imagine the world otherwise.

Notes

The term 'myriad minded' was used to describe Tagore during the conferral of his Oxford doctorate: 'Here before you is the myriad-minded poet and writer, the musician famous in his art, the philosopher proven both in word and deed, the fervent upholder of learning and sound doctrine, the ardent defender of public liberties, one who by the sanctity of his life and character has won for himself the praise of all mankind' (Dutta and Robinson 1997, 353). It also forms the title of Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson's magisterial biography, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Myriad Minded Man* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997).

Although Tagore abjured all labels and sought to steer clear of metaphysical debates over Advaita (non-dual), Dvaita (dualism) and Visistadvaita (qualified non-dualism), Tagore scholars have variously detected Advaitic and Visistadvaitic elements in his works.

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