

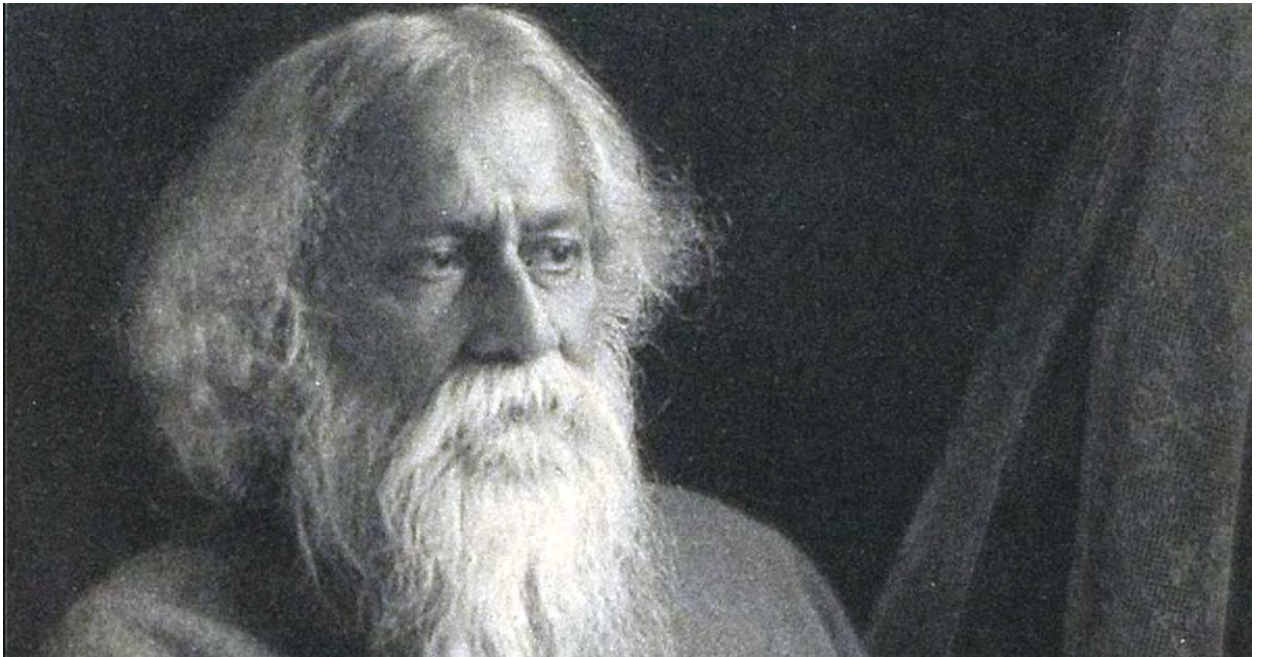
BOOK EXCERPT

Atmashakti, manush-bandha, mukti: The three pivotal values of Rabindranath Tagore's nationalism

An excerpt from 'Explorations in Colonial Bengal: Essays on Religion, Society, and Culture,' edited by Achintya Kumar Dutta.

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An hour ago



Rabindranath Tagore. | Wikimedia Commons

These days, Tagore is often hailed (or scorned) for his “antinationalism”. But we must remember that he did take quite some time to develop this anti-nationalistic stand. Anyway, whether Tagore was ever a nationalist or not seems to me to be a moot question. More importantly, Tagore’s nationalism, had any such thing at all existed, was based on some fundamental human values, which are important even if we take them away

from their nationalist moorings. And it is these values that ultimately pushed him away from nationalism and these same values were given exposition in *Nationalism*, making it much more than an “antinational” exhortation.

Apparently, Tagore was very much a part of the Indian national movement and any cultural history of this movement cannot but feature him prominently. His love for and reflections on his country evidently germinated in the context of the emergent nationalist movement in the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly because his own family was deeply involved in it. As this movement continued to expand its agenda, adjusting its current programme and future goals, he not only kept pace, but also voiced its most forward and progressive thoughts. Thus, he represented Indian nationalism at its best. And then came a time when he went beyond that, thanks to the remarkable originality of his mind. It is well-known that in the post-Swadeshi years, his relationship with the mainstream nationalist movement of India altered decisively and permanently, culminating in his global and complete denunciation of nationalism itself in the book *Nationalism*. But even after this, he continued to lend support to whatever humane, dynamic, freedom-loving, and courageous elements he found in different streams of the Indian nationalist movement.

So long as and so far as the nation was a symbol of wider selfhood to him, a symbol of mutuality and living together that is innate to human nature, Tagore lent his support to the nationalist ideology. But his faith in nationalism appeared shaky from at least the late 19th century. Even in his Swadeshi days in the first decade of the 20th century, that is, his most intense nationalist phase, Tagore expressed clear reservations about nationalism.

Actually, he had problems with certain modules of nationalism that he saw at home and abroad, because he found them too selfish, aggressive, and coercive. Another problem for him was the close association between the State and the nation; he had a deep-seated distrust of the mechanical and authoritarian character of the State. But had Tagore known that he had the liberty to fashion his own nation rather than cling to any particular modular form, that is, had he thought of nationalism in terms of imagination and creativity – as we do today, thanks to Benedict Anderson’s seminal book – and had he been able to dissociate the nation from the State, he would not perhaps have been so impatient with nationalism. Indeed, as Partha Chatterjee has perceptively said, Tagore’s swadesh (one’s own country), a word that occurred frequently in his writings, was not very different from what we know as the nation today. Tagore had started thinking of the country in terms of imagination and creativity since his Swadeshi days. Much later, he wrote in an essay included in the book *Kalantar* (Transition of Age):

In 1905 I called on the Bengalis to tell them this – create your country inwardly with the help of atmashakti (self prowess), because it is through creation that the truth is realised. Viswakarma finds himself in his own creation. To find one’s country means to feel one’s own soul on a broader basis. When we create our country with our own thoughts, deeds and love, we truly see our own soul in our country. Man’s country is the creation of man’s mind.

Atmashakti (self-prowess), that is, a concept of inner strength that flowered in a distinguished form in Tagore’s collections of poems *Naibedya* and *Utsarga* as well as in his book of essays titled *Atmashakti* at the turn of the century, meant building of the character and uplift of the soul of every countryman. He wanted his countrymen to counter the West’s “endless vanity”, “crude bragging”, and “pompous luxury at the price of the poor” with the programme of atmashakti, and thus to reject the war-mongering Western civilisation. The myth of the superiority of Western civilisation, both epistemic and moral, had so long acted as a major prop to the nationalists’ allegiance to British rule. Tagore now challenged this myth powerfully, thus paving the way for the nationalists’ first plunge into an anti-British agitation, which was soon to be occasioned by the Partition of Bengal that took place in 1905.

Atmashakti seeks empowerment by making one feel one’s soul on a broader basis and thus necessarily tends to expand the scale of human existence beyond all narrow confines. In fact, it tends to merge patriotism with a very liberal and loving universalism that reaches out to the entire world.

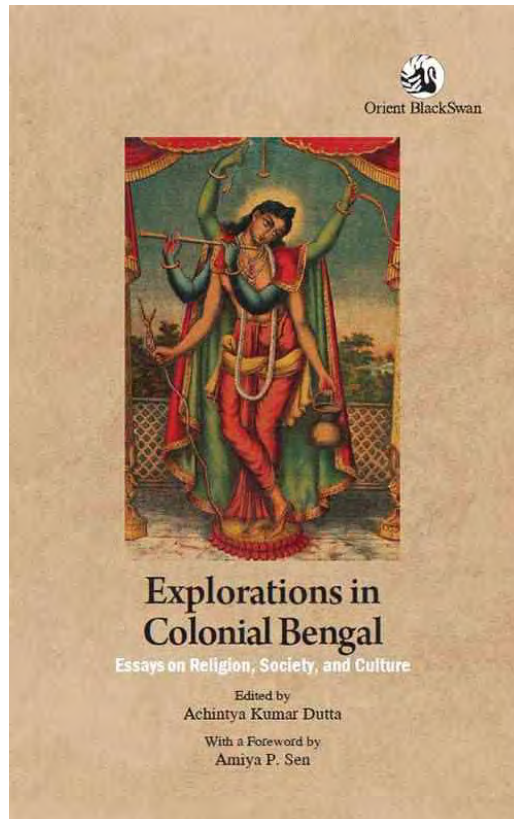
We may recall the very popular song composed by Tagore during the anti-Partition/Swadeshi Movement: “O amar desher mati, tomar pare thekai matha / Tomate bishwamayer, tomate bishwamayer anchal pata” (‘O soil of my country, I bow down to you / Over you Mother Earth has spread the border of her sari’). This, together with his discovery of the real, the ordinary, and the everyday nation in the countryside, where he also

launched a practical project of rural reform, proved to be a decisive factor in his swadesh-related thinking. The Swadeshi Movement was the ultra-nationalist phase of his life. And at the same time, quite paradoxically, he was moving away from nationalism (at least from the way it was manifest around him).

A correlate of atmashakti and another essential component of Tagore's nationalism at this stage was his concept of manush-bandha (binding human beings). In an essay titled "Bharatbarshiya Samaj" ('The Indian Society'), Tagore asserted that the greatness of civilisation (sabyata) lies in its constructive capacity to unify the diverse – "whether you call it 'national' or by any other name does not really matter, the point is to bind human beings."

And in the interests of "manush-bandha", Tagore privileged society over the nation, which he found unsuitable for the huge, multilayered, and multicultural subcontinent of India. In his essay titled "Swadeshi Samaj" ('The Indigenous Society'), written a few months later, he upheld "manusher sange manusher atmiya sambandha sthapan" ('binding humans as relatives, rather than mechanically') as having been the principal effort of India from time immemorial, although the social mode he had in his mind in this connection was the Hindu caste society, the innate inequality of which he chose to ignore. In any case, the premium on society was also clearly pushing him away from the idea of "nation", in the European sense of the term.

So atmashakti and manush-bandha are the two pivotal values of Tagore's swadesh-related thinking, and these values are supposed to make mukti possible. Mukti is more than freedom or liberty (swadhinata), which sounds comparatively mundane. Mukti is the realisation of the human essence. However, unless one is free from external bondages in the world, one cannot attain mukti inwardly. These three underlying values – atmashakti, manush-bandha, and mukti – provided Tagore's nationalism, and later even his antinationalism, with a thread of consistency through all shifts and ambiguities.



Excerpted with permission from "Rejection of Nationalism and Much More" by Anuradha Roy in Explorations in Colonial Bengal: Essays on Religion, Society, and Culture,' edited by Achintya Kumar Dutta, Orient Black Swan.