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Beyond 'kalapani' and Tagore's search for a shared regional identity

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ABSTRACT

In 1927, Rabindranath Tagore wrote a series of letters during his 'pilgrimage' to the countries of the Southeastern Rim of the Indian Ocean. He was convinced that India had forgotten its 'gained' territory that could be traced in some of the local customs and cultures. The presence of stories from the Puranas including The Ramayana and The Mahabharata led Tagore to believe in a larger imaginary Indianness outside its political realm. He held the imposition of 'kalapani' – the Hindu religious sanction against crossing the ocean – as a stumbling block that had eventually forced India to isolate itself. For him, without any concerted vision, it was impossible to attain true unity through 'lip-union from public platforms' [Tagore, R. (2010). *Letters from Java* (I. Chaudhurani and S. Roy, Trans., and S. Roy, Ed., p. 73). Kolkata: Visva-Bharati]. Recent scholarship has problematized the civilizing force of Indic values that Tagore expounded in his *Letters from Java*. However, Tagore's call for consciousness building to rediscover and refine the common areas of Asian tradition and culture merits revisiting. Thus the paper purports to chart the cartography of the minds that once united different places and constituted a cultural capital as well as to survey the various metaphorical implications of 'kalapani.'

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Rabindranath Tagore's wanderlust led him to different parts of the world and he presented his experiences and ideas in different forms. His travel writing includes letters, poems, lectures and essays, which were serialized in different journals such as *Bharati*, *Prabasi* and *Tattwabodhini*. One collection of these travel experiences, aptly titled *Pather Sanchay* and loosely translated as 'gathered along the way,' reflects on the shaping influences of these sojourns on his poetic mind. Travel, for the sage poet, is a renewal of human existence manifested in the universe and an awareness of the ancient and primordial process that is always at work. Such meditative interpretation of travel makes him consider his journeys as 'pilgrimages' imbued with a 'sense of profit.' In the first essay of the collection, 'Jatrar Purbojatra' (Prelude to Journeys), he explained:

My eyes will be satisfied only when I can observe the diversity of the earth in all its splendor. But I must acknowledge that I am also motivated by a sense of profit. It is not merely pleasure that I crave, there is a utilitarian core to my desire to travel. I strongly feel that if any European travels to India with a genuine respect, he attains the goals of a pilgrimage. If we in turn go to

Europe without any prejudice and witness the truth that makes it great, what superior pilgrimage can we think about? (In Ahmed, Dubey, & Sikri, 2013, p. 104)

The religious aura of the excerpt, according to Amrit Sen who translated it from Bengali, shows how Tagore viewed travel as an 'ideational space' where two different worldviews collide, where experiences are shared and where the historical process that has yielded civilizations is acknowledged. The 'profit' that Tagore talks about was largely spiritual, especially in a material world that was grappling with both imperialism and modernization. Sen sums up the essential quality of Tagore's travelogues brilliantly while contextualizing the poet's 1932 visit to Iran. He posits:

As we sift through the travelogues, there is a palpable strain of utopianism regarding these travels – each country is imagined or constructed in a context that highlights tolerance, exchange and ethical response to modernity. Wherever this utopian space is rebuffed by real historical situations, Tagore's critique is incisive. (In Ahmed, Dubey, & Sikri, 2013, pp. 104–105)

Tagore could afford to be utopian and critical because of his recently found fame as the first Asian to receive a Nobel Prize in literature in 1913. Indeed, there is a difference between the early Tagore who went to England without succeeding in becoming a civil servant or a barrister, and the later Tagore who traveled across the world as 'the world's first international literary celebrity' (Amit Chaudhuri, 'Foreword' in Alam & Chakravarty, 2011, p. xix). As a Nobel laureate he could share his convictions with much more confidence and commendable authority, and comment on issues that were both regional and international. At a time when the world had already seen the havoc wreaked by the Great War and was anticipating the next one, Tagore became a fierce critic of the West for its inherent violence, imperialist exploitation and materialistic (read Capitalist) obsession. At the same time, he critiqued his own country for lagging behind in claiming its share in the scientific progress that had allowed the West to establish its wholesale supremacy. As an exponent of both Brahmo reformism and Bengali renaissance, Tagore wanted India to overcome the restrictions imposed by the age-old patriarchy that colonized the minds of his countrymen and claim its pre-colonial heritage of civilizational ascendancy, an idea that he shared with his fellow members of the Greater India Society. However, he neither limited himself to the jingoist nationalism that his compatriot Gandhi was using to gain independence from the British nor displayed any cultural chauvinism that the right-wing BJP government is flagging today. His 'open-minded reasoning and the celebration of human freedom,' praised by Sen (2011) in his review of *The essential Tagore*, did not allow him to do so. Both imported imperialism and home-grown nationalism were seen as hurdles, the metaphorical black waters – *kalapani*, that needed to be crossed to become part of the emerging spirit that he noticed in other parts of Asia, all set to engage with the West in equal terms. Conversely, Tagore's enthusiasm for Indianness in the larger context of pan-Asian solidarity is an area that merits critical reflection. The ultimate freedom that Tagore seeks must travel through the 'dark waters' – the irreligion that posed itself as religion – that lie in the core of both individual and national psyche. Tagore's detestation for nationalism and soliciting of a universalism constitute the other layers of the symbolic *kalapani* that this paper will explore. In particular, the paper will read some of Tagore's personal letters written during a tour to Singapore, Indonesia and Malaya to understand his overlapping interests in breaking the parochial religious sanctions, outdoing the insular nationalistic mindset, forging a transnational

connectivity and voicing out of liberal humanism. It proposes to look at the 'Java Diaries' in order to understand his variegated approach towards India and its relationship with the world in the early days of the twentieth century. The paper begins by investigating the literal *kalapani*, the Hindu restrictions on crossing the ocean, before moving on to its metaphorical implications in the context of Tagore's visit to Java. The paper ends with Tagore's construction of a shared cultural space that anticipated a regional identity, the significance of which we are beginning to see and realize, almost a century later.

Crossing the ocean for Tagore is both literal and figurative. Even in the late nineteenth century, sea voyages were considered to be a violation of orthodox Hindu strictures. Tagore dealt with the issue of foreboding surrounding sea voyages in his characteristic poetic insinuations. In his essay titled 'Travel' (1939), he tells us of the maverick man who tames the horse to double his biped feature only to reach the shore of the ocean that flickers its waves in a resounding veto against traveling:

Traveling on land, man eventually found himself confronted with the sea. Now there was no way of moving forward. There lay the blue waters, their depth unfathomable, shores out of view. And countless waves, wagging their forefingers to the land-dwelling humans: 'Take one step forward, and we will teach you a lesson. None of your coercion will work here.' (Alam & Chakravarty, 2011, p. 710)

Human hearts, Tagore adds, want 'to go on; that is its *dharma*[religion]. For unless it moves, it dies' (p. 711). Terming death as a journey from one abode to another, Tagore argues, 'under no circumstances will [death] allow life to remain imprisoned within the walls of some tradition' (p. 712). To travel is to view 'the universe face to face.' Tagore posits, 'In a sense, the universe is everywhere. But still, only if one journeys forth discarding languor, breaking all habits, opening one's eyes to the world, can our vision break free of its confinements and our soul be reborn' (p. 712).

Tagore's figuration of journey as *dharma* (sacred) dispels the social taboo that has restricted sea voyages as *adharma* (profane). Etymologically, *kalapani* involves ancient Hindu restrictions against undertaking any sea voyage. Several Hindu scriptures hold 'making voyages by sea' ('Baudhayana Sutra' II.1.2.2) a punishable offense leading to *pata-niya*, loss of caste (Gopalakrishnan, 2008). For the Hindus, India is *punyabhumi*, the land of spiritual preeminence. Especially for the upper caste Hindus, going beyond India posed the double threats of not being able to perform their daily rituals and of coming into contact with the *mlechhyas* (savages and barbarians, e.g. Muslims). Orthodox Hinduism's sanction on seafaring had been explained by Subramanian (1999):

The Baudhayana Dharma Sutra forbade orthodox Brahmins to engage in sea travel and prescribed severe penances and penalties for transgressions. ... *Manu* in his *Smriti* ... declared that a Brahmin who had gone to sea was unworthy of entertainment at a *sraddha*. (p. 9)

However, tales from the medieval period involving Vijaysinha, Srimanta and Chand Saudagar suggest that Bengalis had not always been circumscribed by *kalapani*. The Indians have been a seafaring people even before the time of the Muslim rulers. The *Rig Veda* alludes to several sea voyages of Varuna. According to the historian K. M. Panikkar, the Hindus knew the use of a *matsyayantra* (fish device, a magnetic compass) and possessed the skills to construct ocean-going ships sturdy enough to venture into the distant reaches of the Arabian Sea. Panikkar claimed that the Hindus of the Indian South were not at all

dissuaded by the religious sanctions. The 'colonisation as well as cultural and religious osmosis by sea from India's east coast to SE Asia' was due to a series of maritime activities that began with the Mauryan emperors, and pursued by the Andhra, Pallava, Pandya, Chalukya and Chola dynasties. The fact that Hindu influence sustained itself so far from the subcontinent from the fifth to the thirteenth century suggests that these outposts were receiving constant and substantive maritime sustenance from the mother country ('Hindus and the Ocean Taboo').

Mukherjee (2013) in her study of the material culture dictated by the Indian Ocean has shown how the Javanese serpentine folk deity that originated in South Asia was transposed into a royal cult figure under the Javanese sovereignty (p. 45). Ibn Battuta's account of traveling from Bengal to the Indonesian archipelago in a boat solidifies maritime connectivity in the fourteenth century (Murshid, 2013, p. 11). However, from the mid-nineteenth century, seafaring had been avoided by both the Hindus and the Muslims to the extent of being virtually banned. According to Murshid (2013), a former faculty member at SOAS, *kalapani* was considered as a type of exile which was no less than death (p. 37). The idea gained further currency after the sepoys who revolted in Chittagong in 1857 were forced to cross the Bay of Bengal and exiled to the Andaman Islands. Murshid argues that the fear of crossing the ocean was intensified by the ruthless Dutch pirates and their brutality which made it impossible for seafarers even to go for Hajj (p. 11).

Things began to change in the nineteenth century as there was a surge in the number of Indians breaking the taboo and crossing the ocean; not without consequences though. Swami Vivekananda, for instance, was not allowed to enter a temple after his return from the Parliament of the World Religions in Chicago in 1847 (Gopalakrishnan, 2008). Even Mahatma Gandhi had to go through an expiatory ritual following his return from England (Pande, 2010, p. 212). Rabindranath Tagore's grandfather Prince Dwarkanath Tagore was only the second Calcuttan after Raja Ram Mohan Roy to travel to England. Although credited as the first Indian to own a steam yacht and initiate maritime trading links with the Europeans, Prince Dwarkanath too faced excommunication by the inner circle of his family.

Because of the religious taboo, the British were finding it difficult to recruit indentured laborers for their plantation colonies. In 1894 the Indian legislative council constituted a standing committee to address the Sea Voyage Question (Roy, 1991, p. 46). Exponents of the Bengal renaissance tried to change the mindset of the Indians towards seafaring. The supporters of sea voyages, headed by Surendranath Banerjea, formed an organization that highlighted the social, political and economic progress that overseas travel could yield.

Born in 1861, Tagore was fully aware of the controversies surrounding sea voyages. In 1878, he was sent to England for his formal schooling, but came back to India within two years and started managing his family estates in Bengal and Orissa. His European experience inculcated a sense of urgency in modernizing India, while being fully aware of the evils of imperialism. At home, he could sense the anxiety about various agencies of nationalistic mobilization that made him critical of nationalism. In its stead, he proposed a type of universalism that would go beyond the damaged sense of the self of Indian identity produced by imperialism, and searched for a glorious past where Indians could engage with their fellow citizens with pride and honor. Seen thus, Tagore's sea voyages make both literal and symbolic statements against a tradition that was limiting India from exploring

its reach. He was the cultural and spiritual ambassador of India who went around the globe preaching humanity.

Rabindranath's 'ideas from the East' caught the attention of an Indonesian nobility who was settled in the Netherlands. The Indonesians invited Tagore hoping to showcase the authenticity of Javanese cultures. Tagore accepted the offer, and carefully chose his delegates for his Indonesia tour organized by the unique university that he had established: Santiniketan and its international wing, Visva-Bharati.

During the tour, he wrote 21 letters. The letters are very candid in tone, and they offer some personal insight into Tagore's renewed interest in Southeast Asia, his concurrent disappointment with the West, his growing commitment to a shared regional identity which is not inhibited by colonial fear. It should be remembered that these letters are addressed to some very special people in Tagore's life. His views are very intimate and they often lack the diplomacy that one expects in a cultural exchange forum.

Written between the middle of July and early October of 1927, they were initially published in Bangla as *Java-Yatrir Patra* ('Letters from a Sojourner in Java') as a companion piece to *Paschim Jatrir Diary* ('Diary from a Traveler in the West'). In his own characteristic poetic prose, Tagore not only chronicles his journey but also reflects on the similarities between Indian culture and heritage and the ones that he has experienced along the coastline of Singapore and Indonesia. After his return, Tagore asked his niece Indira Devi Chaudhurani (1873–1960) to translate these letters into English. Accordingly, 17 letters were published in *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* during the poet's lifetime. The translation initiative goes on to show how serious Tagore was in circulating his ideas with a wider audience. In 2010, Supriya Roy translated four more letters and brought out the edited collection *Letters from Java* (2010), which is the primary source used for this present article.

The personal journals and letters are supplemented by the official report submitted at the annual meeting of the Visva-Bharati University by Tagore's entourage, the famous linguist Sunitikumar Chatterjee. The report termed the tour as a 'cultural mission,' emphasizing on its double aim:

The first was to study the remains of Indian civilization in the antiquarian relics as well as the life and the living arts in Indonesia and Further India. The second aim was to bring about close cultural cooperation between India and these regions through an appreciation of the ideals of Visva-Bharati. (Tagore, 2010, p. 13) [Emphasis added]

Interestingly while quoting this report in her introductory note, Roy makes a small, albeit significant, typographic editorial change; the spelling of 'farther' has been changed to 'further.' This is different from Das Gupta's (2002) quote of the same phrase: 'Indonesia and farther India' (p. 456) [emphasis added]. While Roy's 'further' implies Tagore's nationalistic interest of promoting India, Chatterjee's 'Indonesia and farther India' denotes a cultural spatialization of Asia. On the surface, Roy's proofreading appears to be quite innocent. However, the difference in the homonyms is central to our understanding of the ideological construction not only of India but also of Asia as viewed by Tagore and the think-tank that he was affiliated with, Greater India Society. This leads Das Gupta to argue for a third agenda behind the visit, which involved a search for an Asian identity beyond the political boundaries of India (2002, p. 456). Roy, however, adds a very practical purpose for the cultural 'pilgrimage' ('Letter 1,' Tagore, p. 35): raising funds for the newly established Visva-Bharati (Tagore, 2010, p. 25).

In hindsight, it can be argued that Tagore's search for an India outside India and his imagining of a place, which is spiritually and culturally bound, hint at a transcultural Asia that is beyond the narrow nationalism that he experienced both at home and abroad. In order to understand Tagore's attitude towards Asia, his Asianism as it were, it is important to distinguish the political India under the British Empire from the 'Other' India that Tagore imagined under the rubric of the Greater India Society, an idea to which I shall return. The main purpose of this article is to proffer a critical analysis of Tagore's *Letters from Java* to focus on Tagore's notions of nationalism, regionalism and universalism, as well as to point out the hindrances against the realization of such a union symbolized by *kalapani*, the religious restrictions against seafaring. Tagore's renewed interest in the Indian Ocean rim suggests a people to people connectivity that benefits from shared memory. While Tagore's tracing of India outside its political territory can be suspected as a type of Orientalist project, his humanism yearns for a spiritual harmony that we often fail to detect in a material world.

For Tagore, Europe was the epitome of scientific development. However, writing in a post-World War I period, Tagore was disenchanted by the 'god-like' Europe's failure to utilize science in a 'godly' way for the benefit of mankind. To his disappointment, Europe had become an 'emissary of death' ('Letter 1,' p. 34). From the *Amboise*, the ship that Tagore boarded from Madras *enroute* to Malacca, the poet wrote to Nirmalkumari Mahalnobis, the wife of his scientist colleague at Santiniketan, about the wonders that Europe had done with science. He wrote:

How great man has become by his concerted endeavours to know all that is to be known, his organized gathering up of all knowledge so acquired, can only be realized when one is in Europe. By the power thus gained Europe is making the world a world for men. ... But that same Europe is afflicted by the lack of another aspect of truth, wherefore man finds the door closed to man. In man's inner universe Europe has thus become a danger to man the world over; and here she is also in danger herself. ('Letter 1,' pp. 33–34)

Tagore underscored the need for 'a union of science and religion' (p. 35) for 'making the world a world for men' (p. 34). Elsewhere, he expressed his doubts over the social system of the West: 'We may learn science from the West, but can we make her social system our own?' ('Letter 20,' 2010, p. 137). While Tagore held the cultural or spiritual social system of India in high esteem, he thought of political India as rather 'static'; the political Europe in contrast was 'dynamic.' These stereotypes in a way foreshadow Edward Said's categorization of the Occident and the Orient in which Europe asserts its positional superiority while stressing on the backwardness of the non-Europeans. Tagore twists the rules of engagement by asserting cultural superiority of India. His strategy is quite Saidean; after all, 'Orientalism,' for the Palestinian-born cultural critic, 'depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand' (Said, 1978, p. 15).

Tagore went on to explain the vitality of a spiritual India that could induce fresh blood to a dying Europe. He could see that India had the dynamism and courage of a 'full blooded youth' in contrast to the 'feeble decrepitude' of Europe (p. 36). The inherent contradictions of these categorizations suggest that in his construction of humanism he was constantly shifting between two 'Europes' (one enlightened and

progressive, the other imperialistic and aggressive) and two 'Indias' (one spiritual and enlightened, the other static and self-obsessed). His glorification of spiritual India will substantiate this idea:

... how different it was on the day when India sent forth her wisdom outside herself, inasmuch as when she did so it came to be accepted by the outsiders. For had she not spread the intellectual truths of her own winning, into Tibet, Mongolia, and the Malaya islands, the inner pathway of true human relationship? ('Letter 1,' p. 35)

The imperialistic Europe, in contrast, is making a 'death dance' in pursuit of its material greed. 'Greed is born of want' ('Letter 2,' 2010, p. 40), and a 'corpulent sister' of want is 'inertia' which is affecting modern civilization including the average Indians (p. 41). This was the same 'static' India that presumably lacked the scholarly wherewithal to find out about its own heritage, and was waiting for the 'dynamic' Dutch and the Germans to do the work. Then again, he acknowledged the role of the enlightened and progressive European Orientalists, particularly those from France, Germany and the Netherlands for viewing 'man as man' ('Letter 11,' p. 90). This is the Other Europe that stood antithetically to the 'emissary of death' idea mentioned earlier.

As the honorary *purodha* (spiritual Head) of the Greater India Society, Tagore's interest in Burma, Indonesia and Malaysia – the countries with which India had cultural contacts – was quite clear. Of these countries, Indonesia had a special place for him as both European and Indian scholars located the Indian heritage of this island in the Indian Ocean. Tagore's initial enthusiasm about the region, however, seemed to be a purely academic one. He was genuinely interested in finding a spiritual bond between the nations connected by the waters of the Indian Ocean. Prior to his tour, true to the spirit of the Greater India Society, he wrote to Ramananda Chatterjee in May 1927 mentioning that he would leave behind 'an appropriate person who could do some historical research' (Tagore, 2010, p. 11).

Tagore's curiosity about Java germinated during his visit to the Colonial Institute in Amsterdam, where he came across some photographs and slides of temple ruins in Java that would rekindle his wanderlust and make him head for the island. Centuries after their colonization, the Dutch ethnologists began a systematic study of the Southeast in the eighteenth century. Hendrik Kerndid conducted extensive research in the early twentieth century to argue that the Hindu colonizers were actually responsible for introducing several features of Javanese art (Basa, 1998, p. 396). The French Orientalists in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries came to a similar conclusion by tracing Southeast Asian references in the *Arthashastra*, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Mahanidessa*, and various *Puranas* as well as the *Jataka* stories in Pali, Sanskrit and Tamil languages (Basa, 1998, p. 395). Tagore's colleague at the Greater India Society, R.C. Majumdar, was guided by the Dutch and French ethnologists in identifying Old India's presence in the Southeast (pp. 395–396). Tagore's view of Asia is loosely shaped by this academic milieu of Orientalism in which, according to Said, the West was making a career out of the Orient (Said, 1978, p. 13).

On the eve of his departure, the Greater India Society accorded Tagore a reception during which the poet clearly outlines his tour objectives:

One who could smash the inner bonds of one's ego can easily transcend the cruel barriers of external geography. So if we want to know what the true wealth of India consisted of, we

should traverse the oceanic barriers to reach the vast and far off field of her self-dedication. Thus from India Abroad we may catch a glimpse of that eternal grace of India which we often fail to grasp, enveloped as we are today by the impure dust storm of our modern history. (Tagore, 2010, p. 17) [Emphasis added]

Tagore's 'India Abroad' could be dubbed as a source of cultural capital as he planned to gain 'knowledge of the nobler history of India's moral greatness' (p. 17). He states, 'A planet shrinks and gets isolated the moment its light is quenched' (p. 17). While in Bali, Tagore witnessed some Hindu rituals and festivities. He found both similarities and differences in the manner the rituals were conducted. The Brahmins in Java, for example, were not wearing any sacred thread; they talked about the deity Gayatri without knowing the relevant verses. This made Tagore reflect on the 'tapestry of half forgotten history' ('Letter 9,' p. 71) that he was witnessing.

He contended, 'Hindus, prohibited of sea voyage, slipped back into her distance and ensconced within her borders, forgot altogether that she had gained a large territory outside her own walls' (p. 70). Although he did not use the term *kalapani*, he highlighted the Brahminic prohibition against sea voyage as the contributing factor behind India's cultural withdrawal from the region. In a letter to Nirmalkumari on 19 July, the poet describes a thunderstorm with reference to the ancient Sanskrit poet and dramatist, Kalidasa. The ocean is described as a symbol of obstacles. Only a rebel, who has the courage to test the limit of gods' realms, can dare to cross the ocean. Using an image he had used in his 1939 essay 'Travel' quoted earlier, he wrote:

From the shore, man looked on the ocean. No greater barrier could have been imagined. Invisible to the gazer is its limit, unattainable to the diver its depth. Dark as the seed of Yama, the Lord of Death, its billowing menace is uplifting in a gesture of perpetual prohibition. But man the eternal rebel, refused to obey it. With a thunderous roar came the threat: *If you disobey, you die!* – Well, said man with a flippant wave of his fragile fingers, *If I must I will...*

When, therefore, this three-and-a-half-cubit-long creature made his boat, saying: 'I will bestride the seas!' the gods did not laugh. They whispered in his ears the *mantram* of victory, and waited. And now the ocean's back has been subdued, its depths are being explored. (2010, pp. 45–46)

These are the dynamic, rebel-Indians of the ancient past who transgressed the narrow forebodings of the scriptures and traveled to the island nations and left a cultural legacy that Tagore experienced. His visit to Indonesia and the other islands only confirmed to him what he was looking for. Attending a funeral at Bangli, he looked at the procession of men and women and described them as 'some picture from the Ajanta caves come out from the realm of art into the realm of life' (2010, pp. 63–64). In the sculptures of Borobudur, for instance, he noticed an 'artistic figuration' that could only flourish in fresh congenial soil. While listening to some of the Sanskrit verses at the palace of the Raja of Gianjar, he noticed

broken remains of Hindu culture' that made him think of an earthquake-stricken old city buried under the rubbles of earth; 'relics of the former are still showing through in places, and the two have thus combined in forming a new human settlement. ('Letter 10,' 2010, p. 78)

This makes him categorize two spatial Indias, at home and abroad; the 'walled India' and the 'isolated islands.' He observed,

From an outside view they have been cut off from India for centuries, but these epics have given them a subtle refuge within her soul. These islands are called the Dutch Indies; they are in point of fact the Vyasa Indies. ('Letter 14,' p. 113)

He was amazed by the reverence with which the Chief of Karem Asem had been referring to the place names such as Himalaya, Vindhya-chala, Ganga and Yamuna. This compelled him to ask if there could be any national consciousness 'devoid of actual geographical and ethnological realization?' ('Letter 9,' p. 74). Conversely, according to Roy (2010), Tagore was so impressed with the festivals in Java that he introduced seasonal festivities to Santiniketan in 1928, a year after his return from Java to his home institution (p. 25). He was particularly impressed by the dance moves and gestures which were also incorporated in his dance dramas. He also encouraged his daughter-in-law Pratima Devi to introduce the art of Batik in India (Alam & Chakravarty, 2011, p. 698).

Much later, he wrote a letter in 1939 to the Congress leader Jawaharlal Nehru, the future prime minister of independent India, about the need to revive the historic forces of Asiatic unity:

India's great awakening had crossed deserts and mountains, the overflow of her glorious epoch of culture touched far continents and left permanent deposits in distant shores of Asia. In my visits to China, Japan, and to Siam, Java, and Bali, I felt profoundly moved to find how the communion of our culture had persisted even up to our own days. (In Alam & Chakravarty, 2011, p. 698)

Tagore's regional interest that he shares with the Greater India Society has however been severely criticized by the Cambridge-based academic Bayly (1999). In a seminal essay, she dubbed the cultural mission of Tagore as nothing short of an 'orientalist project' (p. 710) while accusing the nineteenth century exponents of Bengali renaissance who were the figureheads of the Society for promoting a type of 'benevolent imperialism' (p. 708). Their polemical and provocative accounts of the civilizing missions, according to Bayly, simply highlight their presumed cultural supremacy of Hinduism and Buddhism. The noticeable oversight of leaving the Islamic seafaring tradition out of the shared heritage discussion in Tagore somewhat strengthens Bayly's suspicion.

This is also evident in the letter that is included as an annexure in Roy's translated volume. In this signed letter printed on an official Visva-Bharati letterhead, which is now preserved at the Rabindra Bhaban, Kolkata, Tagore addressed an unspecified person. The content suggests that the letter is probably a plea to the philanthropist benefactor J. K. Birla who donated Rs. 10,000 for Tagore's journey (2010, p. 12). It read:

... India forgot her colonist sons and they lost all touch with the mother country. They gradually succumbed to the easy life there, their ancient traditions became fossilized and meaningless. ... But the Hindu traditions are still a reality and even the Moslem invasion and adoption of that agate-like religion could not obliterate their inherited cultural tradition ... there is certainly an imperative duty for Hindu scholars to make the island people realize the full significance of their heritage. (Tagore, 2010, p. 228)

Bayly's allegation of Tagore's imperialism seems rather obvious in these particular lines. However, this could very well be the position of the Greater India Society. After all, the society was engaged in constructing an intellectual milieu that underscores India's cultural supremacy. Bayly proposes a critical distancing from the translocal idiom of the Greater India Society as it has refused to view Indian history as a continuum:

Greater India's key ideas were diffusionist rather than evolutionist. They also directly challenged prevailing definitions of the Indic world as a domain of timeless, ahistorical essences, and fixed territorial units successively conquered by the irresistible forces of 'Aryan', 'Muhammadan' and European civilisation. (p. 711)

Bayly has become a significant point of departure for any serious discussion on *Letters from Java*. In Tagore's defense, one can argue that Indianness is actually subsumed under the kind of universalism that the humanitarian poet envisioned in most of his literary works. Quayum (1996), for one, upholds a similar argument. The transcendental humanism that Tagore champions is actually synonymous with a universalism that dissociates itself from European imperialism. Duara (2010) categorizes Tagore's construction of a culturally politically motivated regionalization of space as the 'Anti-imperialist Regionalization Project in Asia' (p. 969). Duara places Tagore along with the Japanese philosopher Okakura Tenshin and the Chinese scholar Zhang Taiya who were arguing for the kind of transcultural connectivity that they thought was necessary for resisting Western imperialism. Okakura, who came to India twice, in particular, had a shaping influence on Tagore. The poet perhaps met the Japanese visionary once at a Ramakrishna Mission in Calcutta (Mookerjee, 1961, p. 122). Duara (2010) argues that both Okakura and Zhang 'acknowledged the necessity of creating a modern nation-state in line with the Western model to combat the imperialist powers. Nationalism was a necessary moment in the conception of pan-Asianism. Only Tagore opposed this position' (p. 971).

What made Tagore's position unique is his apathy towards nationalism both at home and abroad. He was opposed to Gandhi's *swadeshi* movement that encouraged the locals to burn foreign goods as they were deemed 'impure.' For a pragmatic Tagore, rejecting cheap fabrics in favor of hand-loomed local expensive cloth was an instance of mindless, parochial nationalism. Tagore was against such indiscriminate rejection of the West. He was not fully subservient to western goods and ideas either. He argued,

We, in India, must make up our minds that we cannot borrow other people's history, and that if we stifle our own we are committing suicide. When you borrow things that do not belong to your life, they only serve to crush your life ... I believe that it does India no good to compete with Western civilization in its own field. ... India is no beggar of the West. (Soares, p. 106; as cited in Quayum, 2006, p. 42)

He also could foresee the religious rift that the Gandhian brand of nationalism was producing. Religion for Tagore should not be turned into a grave, a confinement for various sects. He concludes his famous essay, 'Hindus and Muslims,' with a plea for overcoming 'our mental barriers, for if we don't, there will be nothing in the future for us' (Alam & Chakravarty, 2011, p. 182). This issue is symbolically narrated in his novel *Home and the World* set against the backdrop of the *swadeshi* movement. The plot depicts a love triangle involving an aristocratic landlord Nikhil, his wife Bimala, and a revolutionary nationalist Sandip. Bimala, who symbolizes Bengal, and by extension India, is a site contested by two men representing two different ideologies. While Nikhil represents progressive, cosmopolitanism as is evident in his appointment of a British governess for 'modernizing' his wife, Sandip relies on coercion and does not hesitate to use Nikhil's money stolen by Bimala. The imperial force employs its 'divide-and-rule' to diffuse the political tension, resulting in the partition of Bengal in terms of religious orientation and eventual communal riot.

Tagore made no secret of his aversion to nationalism in his meeting with Gandhi. During Gandhi's 1921 visit to Santiniketan, Tagore reminded the Mahatma:

The whole world is suffering today from the cult of a selfish and short-sighted nationalism. India has all down her history offered hospitality to the invader of whatever nation, need or colour. I have come to believe that, as Indians, we not only have much to learn from the West but that we also have something to contribute. We dare not therefore shut the West out. But we still have to learn among ourselves how, through education, to collaborate and achieve a common understanding. (In Guha, 2015, p. 22)

Tagore had just returned from a European tour where he 'watched the faces of European students all aglow with the hope of a united mankind ...' (in Guha, 2015, p. 22). Although by then, especially after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, in which hundreds of non-violent protesters were killed by the British Indian Army led by General Dyer in April 1919, Tagore's love for the West had ebbed. He himself was not afraid to speak against the evils of the West going beyond the typical fear-flattery syndrome of the native. Soon after the massacre, he wrote a letter to the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford and renounced his British knighthood. Tagore displayed not only his love for his people but also for human dignity. While many Indians try to present Tagore as a provincial Bengali poet, he himself never distinguished between regions of India. He spoke for all India and all humanity, when he wrote:

The enormity of the measures taken by the Government in the Punjab for quelling some local disturbances has, with a rude shock, revealed to our minds the helplessness of our position as British subjects in India ... [T]he very least that I can do for my country is to take all consequences upon myself in giving voice to the protest of the millions of my countrymen, surprised into a dumb anguish of terror. The time has come when badges of honour make our shame glaring in the incongruous context of humiliation. (Tagore, 2007, p. 1021)

Terming the massacre as 'without parallel in the history of civilized governments,' Tagore was disenchanted by the fact that god-like Europe was refusing to see 'man as man' ('Letter 11,' p. 90). The monstrosity of imperial Europe made him turn to Asia. He reflects on Japan's win over Russia in the Russo-Japan War in 1905 to believe that Asia can withstand and trounce this evil rise of Europe (Mookerjee, 1961, p. 123). However, he was quite disappointed to see Japan adopting what he thought was a western variant of nationalism and militarization. During one of his visits to Japan, he expressed his disappointment in concrete terms while pointing out that Japan could actually do better in preserving its cultural tradition. He criticized the Japanese in stern language much to the chagrin of the proud nation. A newspaper headline summed up his talk, albeit inaccurately, stating: 'Tagore Curses Civilization,' and a British secret service official filed a report, mentioning:

Tagore harps on the evils of European civilization and on mission of Japan to lead in the spread of the higher idealised [sic] Asiatic civilization. Not the kind of speech one would hope to hear from a member of the British Empire. (In Guha, 2015, p. 10)

One of the ideas that he reminded his audience in Japan was: 'True modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste. It is independence of thought and action, not tutelage under European schoolmasters' (in Guha, 2015, p. 11).

Tagore at that time was beginning to promote Asia as an alternative powerbase outside Europe. In an interview with the *Manchester Guardian*, Tagore observed that the Japanese,

'think it their country's mission to unite and lead Asia' (Guha, 2015, p. 11). While Tagore does not disagree, he is quick to ask: 'Has she in view a federated or an imperialized Asia? In military and naval power, and in commerce and industry, she is already the foremost country in the East. In things purely of the intellect and spirit she is not' (Guha cited in pp. 11–12). It is no wonder that Tagore was given a cold farewell, as none but the host came to see the first Asian Nobel laureate off (Nandy, 2006, p. 3500).

Earlier, Tagore faced student protests for speaking against nationalism in China. Tagore by then was confident of his international role and was not shy to speak about the global order. Thus in the 1920s, he offered himself as a spokesperson for Asia. Tagore's own philosophy behind the Visva-Bharati as 'one nest for the world' chimes with the view with which he approached the world. The name of the place has been explained as *yatra visvam bhabaty ek anidam* – where the world makes its home in a single nest (Das Gupta, 2002, p. 458).

The mood of the moment is captured in a small volume of collected essays on nationalism titled *Creative Unity*. In his essay, 'The Nation' he dubs the 'Cult of the Nation' as a threat to humanity. He observes:

the greater the amount of success the cult enjoyed, the stronger are the conflicts of interest and jealousy and hatred which are aroused in men's minds, thereby making it more and more necessary for other peoples, who are still living, to stiffen into nations. With the growth of nationalism, man has become the greatest menace to man. (In Guha, 2015, p. 24)

Visva-Bharati was envisioned by Tagore as a site that will mitigate the contending forces of an expansionist Europe that belittles humanity in the name of material progression and the inward looking provincial nationalism. Tagore observed: 'The peoples of the world have come close to one another through science but they must also come near in spirit in order to give truth to the fact of external closeness' (qtd. in Guha, 2015, p. 27).

Tagore's call for peace and harmony requires a mutually agreed space where the stakeholders could engage with emancipated thoughts and mutual respect. In almost all his literary work he has promoted his vision of transgressing the limitation of our finite self and becoming part of the infinite. The same transcendentalist attitude dictates his world view which is the founding principle of his humanism and universalism. For a world tattered with self-serving material interests, the search for a nest-like harmony in a region may seem romantic, albeit utopian. Then again, Tagore's universalism seems partial in its scope as he has veered away from his earlier interest in the West and focused on a type of regionalism in Asia. He has subscribed to a view that acknowledges the supremacy of Chinese, Japanese and Indic cultures. Such propositions remind us of the fluid nature of any ideological construct. The current multifaceted aspects of regionalism have been aptly pointed out by Acharya (2010), who observes:

(1) regions are not just material constructs but also ideational ones; (2) regions are not a given or fixed, but are socially constructed – they are made and remade through political, economic, social, and cultural interactions; and (3) just like nation states, regions may rise and wither. (p. 1001)

While Tagore's 'India Abroad' in Indonesia underlines ideational construction, it falls short of addressing some of the other avenues of mutual cooperation listed above. This may even make Tagore look like a fanciful visionary. This is probably what Bayly (1999)

was hinting at while claiming that Tagore missed out on the evolutionary schema of a region. Tagore's location of India Abroad in Java and other places is an ahistorical India situated in a land beyond the *kalapani*. For Bayly, such a vision is over simplistic and narrowly nationalistic as it offers an overtly India-centered account of overseas 'cultural colonization' (2004, p. 721). Himadri Lahiri, responding to Bayly, offers a plausible defense of Tagore by mentioning the epistolary nature of the narrative (as cited in Mandal, 2013, p. 131). Indeed, Tagore is writing about a 'cultural mission,' but we need to remember that he is writing personal letters to people back home with whom he could share intimate thoughts. Tagore was writing these letters to give shape to his mental wanderings. The anachronistic musings conform to the style of his own seafaring. Given his target audience, it is no surprise that his letters exclude non-Buddhist and non-Hindu narratives. There are exceptions. For instance, in 'Letter 15' Tagore (2010) appreciated the 'Mahomedan' Raja Pakoe Alom for his family's 'insatiable curiosity to get to know everything they can about India' (p. 117).

Tagore does not go into detail as to why there was a sudden suspension of the relationship with the people across the Indian Ocean. Supriya Roy, the editor of *Letters from Java*, is sympathetic to Tagore's intuitive reading of history. She reminds us that Tagore was not a 'trained historian' and his writing was based on the reading materials available to him at that time (p. 18). The 1920s were a time when the French orientalist were valorizing the role of India to loosen the political grip of their rival (p. 16). Roy writes, 'Rabindranath was proud of his country and its culture but to suggest that his writings incline towards Hindu chauvinism is to misread his intentions totally' (p. 17). Urging that Tagore and 'the other members of the Greater India Society should be considered within the context of their times' (p. 17), Roy recalls the creation of the Visva-Bharati where the sage poet introduced academic disciplines on Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Islam, Chinese and Persian. 'He not only believed in the brotherhood of man, he went from country to country preaching it; and that too at a time when it was not at all fashionable to be an internationalist and shout for peace' (p. 18). The mission statement of Visva-Bharati, penned by its founder Tagore himself, solidifies Roy's claim:

Visva-Bharati [literally translated as 'world-Indian'] represents India as possessing a wealth of mind meant to be shared by all. Visva-Bharati acknowledges India's obligation to offer to others the hospitality of her best culture and India's right to accept from others their best. (Visva-Bharati website)

For Tagore, the ability to give back is a recurrent idea. In an essay 'Crossing the Ocean,' Tagore ruminated from the deck of a ship in the Arabian sea, how he felt hesitant to sit with the English passengers because he was enjoying the benefits of their technology and service without actually being able to pay back (in Alam & Chakravarty, 2011, p. 703). Even in his letter addressed to the Greater India Society prior to his departure for Indonesia, he reiterated: 'The surplus of her [India's] cultural life, which she scattered everywhere, was the core of her personality. Through our capacity to give our real assets to others we earn the title to call the "outsider" our own' (Tagore, 2010, p. 17).

Rahul Rao in an intriguing article, 'Born Sneerers or Ironic Nationalists? Joyce, Tagore, Said, Fanon,' opts for a refreshing stance on the initiatives of the Greater India Society. For Rao, the group initiated a 'cultural conversation' that is not limited by nationalism or imperialism. Instead they were interested in creating an 'intellectual capital' of their

own in order to indulge in a 'natural and profitable' 'commerce of thought with the outer world' (p. 127). According to Tagore, 'to say that such commerce is inherently wrong, is to encourage the worst form of provincialism, productive of nothing but intellectual indigence' ('Reflection on Non-cooperation and Cooperation,' qtd. in Rao, 2010, p. 127). Rao argues that instead of being a 'cultural protectionist,' Tagore actually envisions a world where the 'barriers separating cultures are broken down' (p. 127). In other words, this is the crossing of the mental hurdles, the metaphorical *kalapani*, required for cultural engagement. Tagore's belief in the essential humanity makes him say, 'only that will survive which is basically consistent with the universal,' and later, that cultures 'must pass the test of the world-market, if their maximum value is to be obtained' (Rao, 2010, p. 127).

The other component of the cultural litmus test is human dignity. Tagore repeatedly reminds us in his literary and non-literary works that no relationship can be effective without mutual respect. In his *Home and the World*, the 'absolutely modern' husband Nikhil treats his wife 'on equal terms.' Analogous to the layered political novel, Tagore found mutual respect as a mainstay for bridging the home with the world. In an essay on 'The Centre of Indian Culture,' he writes:

... before we are in a position to face other world cultures, or cooperate with them, we must build up our own by the synthesis of the diverse elements that have come to India. When we take our stand at such a centre and turn towards the West, our gaze shall no longer be timid and dazed, our heads shall remain erect. For, we shall then be able to look at truth from our own vantage ground and open out a new vista of thought before the grateful world. (In Rao, 2010, p. 126)

Fakrul Alam, one of the editors of *The essential Tagore*, makes a similar claim. He observes, 'Throughout his life Rabindranath stressed the need for not merely holding on to one's culture but also the necessity of exploring other cultures to attain wholeness and of doing one's best to become a citizen of the world' (2012, p. 47).

The letters that Tagore wrote from Java explore the spatial and mental archipelago. The letters offer a rare insight into the way he was framing his thoughts about the seascape and the mindscape. His simultaneous acceptance and rejection of the West, his appropriation of India within the rubric of Asianness suggests that he was preparing ground for an imaginary map, in words of one of his famous poems, 'where the mind is without fear and the head is held high.' Mookerjee's (1961) reflection on Tagore's Asianism is pertinent here:

... there are two aspects of Tagore's approach to Asia or his Asianism. ... First, Tagore in his early life was more drawn, as was natural, to the literary and speculative thinking of his own country and also to that of Europe. Secondly, his Asianism was never exclusive nor did he ever lend his support to a political Monroe doctrine for Asia. To him, Asia, just as India, was a vital part of the world whose material and cultural heritage belonged to all mankind. (p. 122)

It is this cultural trade-off that Tagore identifies as the most important feature of identity formation. His final tribute to Indonesia, dedicated as a poem aptly titled 'To Java' upholds a similar urge:

Remember me, even as I remember thy face,

And recognize in me as thine own

The old that has been lost, to be regained and made new. ('To Java,' Tagore, 2010, p. 231)

While Tagore recognizes India in Indonesia, he also longs to contain Indonesia in India. He crosses the dark waters of his mind to forge a new identity that is not restricted by political territories, but connected at a spiritual level, which serves as the bedrock of humanity.

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