

Gandhi and Tagore on Nationalism: A Comparative Analysis through the Lens of Decolonial Political Thought

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Abstract

This paper will explore the question of nationalism by analyzing the thoughts of Gandhi and Tagore in the context of decolonial political thought. This research will seek to contrast the views of Gandhi and Tagore regarding nationalism and their criticisms of colonial modernity, as well as explore how the two thinkers move beyond anti-colonial politics into a more radical decolonization of freedom. By employing a qualitative and comparative analysis methodology based upon textual analysis of the primary and secondary sources, this paper asserts that although Gandhi and Tagore criticize colonial domination, there is a difference in how they envision political freedom. For Gandhi, freedom was associated with self-governance, non-violence, and social transformation, while Tagore warns against nationalism as being an evil which undermines human freedom (Gandhi, 1991; Tagore, 1917). Their results indicate that this line of thought does not hold true to the idea that the nation-state is an inevitable outcome of the decolonization process. Both authors strongly believe that true freedom is associated with changes in the political culture, social structures and modes of thinking influenced by coloniality (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2011). Further, it can be stated that both Gandhi and Tagore are still extremely relevant figures because they present two strong anti-nationalist perspectives, which are ethical Swaraj and humanism, respectively.

Keywords: Nationalism, Decolonization, Gandhi, Tagore, Indian freedom, Politics

1. Introduction

Amongst the most important political concepts in the modern age is that of Nationalism. But its meaning shifts drastically once it is employed in the colonial context. In the colonial context, it tends to be a politics of liberation from foreign rule, but it may also be an expression of exclusion, discipline and political simplification. Among the greatest thinkers about the issue of national identity is that of India's struggle against colonialism. Herein lie the contributions of two of the most famous Indian thinkers of the twentieth century, Gandhi and Tagore. While for Gandhi, Nationalism was justifiable only in terms of truth, Self-discipline, and Social Reconstruction, Tagore was highly critical of the idea of Nationalism precisely because of his fear that it might reduce man to merely a tool of collective (Gandhi, 1991; Tagore, 1917).

It is important to address this disagreement not only because these two men played a crucial role in the struggle for Indian independence, but also because they represent two different approaches to decolonization. Thus, Mahatma Gandhi rejected the cultural authority of Western civilization and asserted that India should not adopt the industrial model of modernity under the guise of progress. Tagore criticized the idea of nation as an abstract concept that is capable of generating violence, mechanical regimentation, and spiritual emptiness. In this sense, this disagreement is not limited to the history of the Indian freedom struggle. This dispute poses a significant theoretical problem that is relevant in the present times, and is nationalism able to liberate the colonized community or is it likely to reproduce domination under a new guise? Decolonial political thought explores exactly such questions.

A decolonial understanding of Gandhi and Tagore will help us think beyond the restrictive approach of celebrating anti-colonial nationalism. This understanding recognizes that liberation is partial if it means merely shifting sovereignty from one ruler to another without changing the epistemological and moral basis of politics. The idea of Swaraj that Gandhi offers requires the people's self-governance and self-discipline, and the criticism of nationalism that Tagore offers is a defence of human freedom against domination by political collectivities. Both these ideas offer a more fruitful way of thinking about postcolonial politics in terms of ethics, plural affiliations, and critique of the nation as a supreme political entity (Chatterjee, 1993; Chakrabarty, 2000).

This essay posits the importance of viewing Gandhi and Tagore as important decolonial political thinkers whose exchange about nationalism is still relevant for contemporary debates regarding questions of identity, liberty, and politics. First, Gandhi makes us understand that there can be no division between means and ends, and that without morality, the nation is empty. Second, Tagore reminds us that human beings cannot be subsumed under the nationalist banner and that without universality, the nation is a perilous concept.

2. Review of literature

There is an abundance of literature that is related to the discussion about Gandhi and Tagore. The scholarly literature about Gandhi is largely focused on the criticism of modern civilization, the concept of Swaraj, and the ideas of non-violence and ethics in politics. The book *Hind Swaraj* is particularly relevant for this purpose since it provides a criticism of industrial civilization and challenges the idea of Western-style development as necessary for political advancement (Gandhi, 1991; Parekh, 1997). Scholarly literature often highlights the fact that Gandhi viewed independence as a process rather than an event.

While Tagore has been largely researched as a poet, philosopher, educator, and cultural critic, his works on politics have become increasingly popular in the past few decades. Tagore's *Nationalism* has now gained wide popularity as a criticism of the modern nation state, which reduces humans and their values to mere collective power. Researchers have noted how Tagore was concerned about the possibility of the birth of nationalism as a political religion that might encourage violence and deny human universality (Tagore, 1917; Mandal, 2018).

The study of postcolonialism adds yet another dimension to this debate. *According to Chatterjee* (1993), anti-colonial nationalism itself contains many internal contradictions since it has to operate under

the structures of modern political power established by the colonial powers. Similarly, demonstrates that the categories of politics derived from Europe continue to prevail in postcolonial thinking even when used against empire (Chakrabarty, 2000). Decolonial scholars such as *Quijano* and *Mignolo* advance this argument further by analyzing the ways in which coloniality survives even after decolonization in terms of epistemologies, political structures, and civilizations (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2011). This body of literature is useful since it enables one to understand Gandhi and Tagore not only as nationalists but also as critical of modern power.

However, at the same time, there remains a need for a specific comparative analysis of Gandhi and Tagore from the perspective of decolonial political theory. Current literature tends to compare them in general terms or talk about them in the context of Indian national history. The area where less work has been done is the comparison of ways in which the two figures critique coloniality, on the one hand, and provide alternative notions of political community, on the other. It is such an analysis that this paper attempts to conduct.

2.1 Research gap

Although the literature may be on both Tagore and Gandhi, there seems to be a lack of integration of all three of these aspects into one body of research. On the one hand, many studies are dedicated to Gandhi's ethics, while others explore Tagore's cultural criticism; however, few scholars examine how these two figures contest colonial modernity from its structural foundations. Moreover, the difference between these two authors is perceived merely as an opposition rather than an intellectual tension, which demonstrates the limits of state-based nationalism.

While another gap exists in terms of decolonial theory not being considered in terms of Indian political thinking. Gandhi and Tagore would be two perfect examples of thinkers in that respect, as both were dealing with the problem of colonialism, but at the same time tried not to copy Western political ideas. The study of these two thinkers would be a way to deal with the concepts of coloniality, anti-colonial resistance, and ethical freedom from a South Asian perspective. Thus, this paper would help fill in the existing research gap.

2.2 Relevance of the study

This study is especially relevant today because of the significance of nationalism as an ideology. Nationalism, as an idea, may become an excuse for exclusion, reductionism, and authoritarian politics. Most of the postcolonial nations have used the idea of unity within the nation to suppress dissent and confine citizenship in the community to a very narrow definition. In this context, Gandhi and Tagore assume great importance because of the fact that both of them have questioned whether the nation is a tool of liberation for humanity or not.

The importance of the research for existing literature is in the individual treatment of Gandhi and Tagore, although the ideas of both are comprehensible only in context. The critique of civilization from Gandhi and the critique of nationalism from Tagore unite around the themes of human dignity, self-respect,

and opposition to colonial mimicry. This research helps to see the problem of anti-colonial thought and to understand the nature of the relationship between nationalism and decolonization. The texts of both authors show that freedom will not ensure justice if the coloniality persists in values and education (Guha, 1997; Nandy, 1987).

2.3 Research questions

Below are the research questions that are going to be investigated in this study:

1. What was the perception of nationalism held by both Gandhi and Tagore in the context of colonization?
2. How did they criticize colonial modernity?
3. How would their views add to the understanding of decolonial politics?
4. What does the difference between them imply about the nature of nationalism?
5. Why does their thinking continue to be important today regarding freedom and identity?

2.4 Aims and objectives

This research paper presents a comparative study of Gandhi's and Tagore's ideas on nationalism from the perspective of decolonial political thought.

objectives include:

- Evaluation of Gandhi's conception of nationalism, Swaraj and politics of non-violence.
- Analysis of Tagore's rejection of nationalism and advocacy of humanism.
- Comparison of their thoughts in the context of colonial modernity and decolonization.
- Detection of decolonial aspects of their political thought.
- Evaluation of the relevance of their political thought to post-colonial political reality.

3. Research methodology

In this research paper, an interpretative and comparative methodology will be applied. In the process of research work, primary documents will include works by Gandhi and Tagore, particularly *Hind Swaraj* and *Nationalism* and some essays and speeches. For the purpose of theoretical framing, secondary sources of post-colonial studies, political theories and decolonization theories will be applied. Comparative methodology is suitable for such a kind of subject since the issue itself does not relate to any historical event but to the discourse of the concepts of nationalism and decolonization.

The method of analysis is not an empirical one but a theoretical one, which involves ideas, concepts, and arguments as opposed to statistical information and field study. It is appropriate to use in the humanities because it permits the meticulous interpretation of texts and intellectual traditions. The research paper aims to prove that both Gandhi and Tagore have criticized modern politics and that their thoughts can be helpful today when discussing freedom, nationalism, and dignity.

4. Findings and discussion

The first major point is that Gandhi and Tagore were both fundamentally opposed to colonialism. However, they viewed their freedom from colonialism differently. Gandhi was concerned with nationalism in terms of the idea of self-governance. He says in his book *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* (1997) that it would be inadequate for India to just get rid of the British rulers. They have to do something about why those rulers became possible in the first place. Swaraj refers to self-control, restraint, simplicity, and constructive work for society. He was very much opposed to industrialization because of its greed-inducing nature.

Though Tagore believed in the importance of liberty, he was highly sceptical about the concept of nationalism as a form of politics. He thought that the nation would be able to create a machine of mass force where people would be used as tools of the machinery of the state or the masses. This is because nationalism tends to substitute actual ethical relationships with mere loyalty and may resort to violence in the name of unity.

The second commonality between the two figures is that both have decolonial thought, though each one practices decolonial thought in a different register. The decolonial thinking of Gandhi can be seen in how he refused the West's idea of modernity as the standard of civilization. He challenges the colonial idea that progress involves industrialization and state centralization. Rather, he dreams of a world where politics takes place from the perspective of autonomous villages, ethical labour, and non-violence.

However, Tagore's critique of decolonization is more cultural and humanistic in nature. His main fear was that either colonialism or nationalism would limit human imagination in some way. The problem with nationalism for Tagore is that it may transform the complexity of individual and collective life into the language of domination. The universal notion of humanity cannot be treated as something idealistic. Rather, it is a political critique of the dangerous violence arising when the nation is equated with moral righteousness. In other words, Tagore attacks coloniality through his refusal of any identity that turns domination into a virtue.

Further, debate between Gandhi and Tagore is productive intellectually because while Gandhi was afraid that criticism of nationalism would harm the movement against colonialism and weaken the ability of people to unite, Tagore was afraid that the use of nationalism would elevate the collective identity above the moral responsibility to preserve human dignity. Both Gandhi and Tagore had human dignity as their motive. The former insisted on the need for the ethics of political action, while the latter insisted on the need to retain one's humanity when politically identifying oneself.

Commonality is that both of these philosophers question the political imagination that is centred on the state. Most nationalist doctrines see the nation-state as the natural means of liberation; however, Gandhi and Tagore have more reservations. Gandhi does not totally believe in the power of centralized state because he finds it coercive in nature. Tagore does not totally believe in nationhood because he finds it exclusionary. Thus, the two together imply that freedom should not be understood in terms of sovereignty or territoriality. It should be measured by the social relations, moral character, and humanity that the political arrangement makes possible.

The importance of the issue in our times is obvious. Today, nationalism frequently manifests itself in its desire for unification at the cost of silencing differences. Both Gandhi and Tagore challenge such an attitude towards politics and society. While Gandhi stresses the fact that both means and ends are equally important and that freedom without morals does not mean anything, Tagore makes us understand that people cannot be limited to national interests. They inspire a political culture that is critical of itself, peaceful and diverse. Decolonial speaking, they propose an alternative to both colonial mimicry and nationalism.

5. Conclusion

Gandhi and Tagore can be considered some of the most influential political theorists of modern India due to the fact that both rejected nationalism in its naive sense. Gandhi believed that freedom was essentially ethical self-government and constructive social change. Tagore regarded nationalism as an ideology that would be extremely dangerous once it became an alternative to human values. Taken in the context of decolonial political theory, it is clear that decolonization cannot simply mean the ending of colonial domination, it must entail its transformation.

Their dispute is still relevant since it makes us consider the connection between the nation, power, and human dignity. In their works, both Gandhi and Tagore confront us with the task of imagining a kind of politics that does not involve domination, exclusion, or mimicry. Rather, they encourage us to think of a political community that would be based on responsibility and self-reflection. Thus, their heritage is not only a part of our history but is also very relevant today in light of the power of nationalism.

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