

RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND ASIAN UNIVERSALISM

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A world-historical transformation is under way in the early twenty-first century as Asia recovers the global position it had lost in the late eighteenth century. Yet the idea of Asia and a spirit of Asian universalism were alive and articulated in a variety of registers during the period of European imperial domination. Rabindranath Tagore was one of the most creative exponents of an Asia-sense in the early twentieth century. “Each country of Asia will solve its own historical problems according to its strength, nature and need,” Tagore said during a visit to Iran in 1932, “but the lamp that they will each carry on their path to progress will converge to illuminate the common ray of knowledge...it is only when the light of the spirit glows that the bond of humanity becomes true.”¹

On February 10, 1937, Tagore composed his poem on another continent, “Africa”, towards the end of his long and creative life in literature. Even more than the empathy for Africa’s history of ‘blood and tears’, what marked the poem was a searing sarcasm directed at the false universalist claims of an unnamed Europe. Even as the ‘barbaric greed of the civilized’ put on naked display their ‘shameless inhumanity’, church bells rang out in neighborhoods across the ocean in the name of a benign God, children played in their mother’s laps, and poets sang paeans to beauty.² The sanctimonious hypocrisy of the colonizer stood in stark opposition to the wretched abjection of the colonized.

In my book *A Hundred Horizons* I had claimed that Tagore was an eloquent proponent of a universalist aspiration, albeit a universalism with a difference.³ This specific claim was part of a larger contention that modern history could be interpreted - not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially - as an interplay of multiple and competing universalisms. The colonized did not simply erect defensive walls around their notions of cultural difference. They were keen to be players in broad arenas of cosmopolitan thought zones and wished to contribute to the shaping of a global future. Their cosmopolitanism flowed not from the stratosphere of abstract reason, but from the fertile ground of local knowledge and learning in the vernacular.

Universalism, cosmopolitanism and internationalism are words and concepts jostling for interpretive space in new global, interregional and transnational histories. Different universalism in my connotation of the phrase shares significant common ground with the meaning of vernacular cosmopolitanism as evoked by Homi Bhabha or local cosmopolitanism as enunciated by Engseng Ho or rooted cosmopolitanism as described by Anthony Appiah while diverging in subtle points of emphasis.⁴ Both notions of universalism with a difference and cosmopolitanism springing from vernacular roots are dramatically at odds with the dominant discourse and debates within the charmed circle of contemporary British and North American analytical philosophy.

Champions of cosmopolitanism who see detached reason as its only source display a visceral distaste for patriotism, confusing it with the narrowest forms of particularism. Colorless cosmopolitanism is assigned a high moral ground; colorful patriotism is deemed to be seductive but devoid of any ethical content.⁵ A figure like Rabindranath Tagore can be annexed to this version of cosmopolitanism only by denuding him of much of his poetry and music and all of his

passion and moral philosophy. Tagore undoubtedly was a powerful critic of worshipping the Nation as God and was horrified by the crimes committed by modern nation-states. Yet he loved the land that had nurtured him and never abandoned a basic anti-colonial stance. He simply did not want Indian patriots to imitate European nationalists. It is not without reason that Mahatma Gandhi in his obituary comment on Rabindranath Tagore in 1941 lauded the poet as ‘an ardent nationalist’.⁶ The large ethical claims made by votaries of a brand of cosmopolitanism that is dogmatically opposed to patriotism need to be put to the test on the ground of the history of colonial empires. Cosmopolitanism would serve as a weak pillar of any theory of human justice if it ruled out as illegitimate most modes of anti-colonial resistance. Fortunately for the idea, that was not the dominant kind of cosmopolitanism that animated the colonized world in the age of global empire. There were various forms of patriotism perfectly compatible with a cosmopolitan attitude that transcended the lines of particular cultural differences.

Within the terms of the Anglophone philosophical debate the opposition to cosmopolitanism based on abstract universal reason is articulated by proponents of reason embedded in inherited traditions.⁷ A useful enough corrective to the excesses of colorless cosmopolitanism, this intellectual position falters because of its insistence on the bounded and implicitly unchanging nature of inheritances from the past. It fails to bring to light the dynamic process of creating and recreating traditions as well as the flows between cultures and the fluidity of cultural boundaries. The history of colorful cosmopolitanism rather than the legacy of the deadweight of traditions might be a better antidote to the philosophical hubris of the votaries of colorless cosmopolitanism.⁸

In order to contest the universalist boasts of Europe, it is important on both conceptual and empirical grounds to recover the universalist aspirations emanating from the colonized world. For scholars of literature or textual traditions an evocation of cosmopolitanism in the sense of generous exchange beyond narrow particularisms, qualified by the linguistic and cultural specificity of the vernacular, may be a sufficiently deft semantic move. For modern historians, however, universalism animates a field of power that can hardly be abandoned; it can only be inflected by the countervailing energy of difference.

The spirit of different universalism that appealed to anti-colonial nationalists may have been water-borne across the Indian ocean, but was never quite defined by an expanse of water. It is best in this context not to exaggerate the contradiction between oceans and continents that has crept into some of the scholarly literature. The myth of continents has been subjected to a powerful indictment with some justice as a meta-geographical concept hopelessly tainted by the hubris of European imperialism.⁹ The idea of Asia, however, or of Africa, I might venture to add, was not a singular one and had almost as many variations as it had individual authors. More important, it was certainly at variance with the concrete expression of Asia invented by nineteenth-century European geographers and cartographers as part of what has been debunked as the modern myth of continents. There were strands within Asian thought-worlds that merely inverted and did not undermine the Europe-Asia dichotomy, being content to invest the latter with a higher order of value and virtue. That forms a less interesting dimension of the modern tug-of-war between Europe and Asia. Far more fascinating was the imagination of Asia as an abstract entity transcending the imperial and national frontiers being etched by colonial powers

on to the physical and mental maps of the colonized, and thereby serving as a prism to refract the light of universal humanity.

The Swadeshi (own country) cultural milieu of early twentieth-century India, despite its interest in rejuvenating indigenous traditions, was not wholly inward-looking; its protagonists were curious about innovations in different parts of the globe and felt comfortable within ever-widening concentric circles of Bengali patriotism, Indian nationalism, and Asian universalism. Aspiring to reconcile a sense of nationality with a common humanity, they were not prepared to let colonial borders constrict their imaginations. The spirit of Asian universalism was brought to India by two turn-of-the-century ideologues—Okakura Kakuzo and Sister Nivedita. Once Sister Nivedita introduced Okakura to the Tagore clan, a formidable cultural bridge was established between East and South Asia. Japanese artists Taikan Yokoyama and Shunso Hishida soon followed Okakura's trail to Calcutta.

While the First World War raged in Europe and the Middle East, Rabindranath Tagore set off on a global oceanic voyage from Calcutta on May 3, 1916, aboard the Japanese ship *Tosamaru*. Traveling on this easterly route for the first time in his life, Tagore encountered a mighty storm in the Bay of Bengal that left no dividing line between the clouds and the waves. Someone seemed to have opened the blue lid of the ocean and countless demons had emerged from below wrapped in grey coils of smoke, as in the Arabian nights, and were shooting up to the sky. After four days at sea the appearance of birds in the sky signaled that land was near. If the ocean was the domain of dance, its shores heralded a realm of music. As the ship moved up the Irrawady towards Rangoon, Tagore observed the row of kerosene-oil factories with tall chimneys along its banks as if Burma was lying on its back and smoking a cigar. Closer to the

city, the long line of jetties were clinging to the body of Burma like so many hideous, giant, iron leeches. Other than the Shwe Dagon temple, Tagore did not find anything in the city that was distinctively Burmese. He lamented the cruelty of the goddess of commerce. ‘This city has not grown like a tree from the soil of the country,’ he wrote, ‘this city floats like foam on the tides of time...Well, I have seen Rangoon, but it is mere visual acquaintance, there is no recognition of Burma in this seeing...the city is an abstraction...’¹⁰

From Burma the *Tosamaru* traveled further east towards Penang, Singapore and Hongkong. The poet felt a sense of joy observing the strength and skill of Chinese laborers working at the port in Hongkong and made an uncannily accurate prophecy about the future balance of power in the world. ‘The nations which now own the world’s resources,’ Tagore argued, ‘fear the rise of China, and wish to postpone the day of that rise.’ It was in the midst of another frightening storm in the South China Sea on May 21, 1916, that Tagore composed his song –*Bhuban Jora Ashankhani* - asking the Almighty to spread his seat of universality in the individual’s heart:

Your universe-encompassing prayer mat

Spread it out in the core of my heart.

The night’s stars, the day’s sun, all the shades of darkness and light,

All your messages that fill the sky –

Let them find their abode in my heart.

May the lute of the universe

Fill the depths of my soul with all its tunes.

All the intensity of grief and joy, the flower’s touch, the storm’s touch –

Let your compassionate, auspicious, generous hands

Bring into the core of my heart.

On May 29, 1916, the *Tosamaru* reached the Japanese port of Kobe. Tagore's three-month sojourn in Japan represented the fulfillment not just of a personal quest, but the search for an Asian universalism that had begun at the turn of the twentieth century. Rabindranath Tagore's direct encounter with the power and scale of art in Japan during his 1916 visit to that country led him to urge Indian artists to look east in order to pioneer a fresh departure from the Swadeshi corpus of ideals. Tagore was as impressed by Japanese visual arts as he was unimpressed by Japan's tendency to imitate the worst elements of European nationalistic imperialism. It was only after rebuking Japan on that count that Tagore undertook the long Pacific crossing to North America on September 7, 1916. He then traveled from the west coast to the east speaking out against nationalism during the Presidential election season of 1916. He did not want Indian patriots to imitate the monstrous features of European nationalism and the territorially bounded model of the nation-state. Tagore's critique of nationalism, however, was perfectly compatible with his anti-colonialism and his patriotic poetry.

In 1924 Tagore traveled once more by sea to Burma, China, and Japan. The poet's entourage on his travels typically included a small but formidable team of intellectuals and artists. Mukul Dey was the artist who had accompanied Rabindranath to Japan in 1916; it would be the linguist Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay and painter Surendranath Kar's turn on a voyage to Southeast Asia in 1927; and the poet Amiya Kumar Chakravarty and writer Kedar Nath Chattopadhyay would go with the Tagore to Iran and Iraq in 1932. On the 1924 journey to East Asia, Rabindranath's companions from Santiniketan were Nandalal Bose, the painter, and

Kshitimohan Sen, an erudite scholar of Sanskrit and comparative religion (grandfather of Amartya Sen), and Kalidas Nag. Young Chinese actors of the Crescent Moon Society performed his play *Chitra* in English on Tagore's birthday, May 8, 1924, at the Peking Normal University. On this trip Tagore preached the virtues of close interaction among Asian cultures. Stung by the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 (sometimes referred to as the Orientals Exclusion Act) in the United States, some of Tagore's admirers even established an Asiatic Association in Shanghai to foster solidarity among all Asians. In Japan Nandalal had the privilege of being hosted by Rabindranath's friend, the artist who had visited India, Taikan, and he was introduced to masterpieces of Japanese art.

It was as an intellectual pilgrim that in July 1927 the poet traveled east from Madras on the French ship *Amboise*. 'India's learning had once spread outside India,' Tagore wrote to Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis on July 15, 1927, '[b]ut the people outside accepted it...We have embarked on this pilgrimage to see the signs of the history of India's entry into the universal.'¹¹ His only motive in making this journey was 'to collect source materials there for the history of India and to establish a permanent arrangement for research in this field'.¹²

The *Amboise* arrived at Singapore on July 20, 1927. All the arrangements for Tagore's tour of the Malay peninsula had been made by Ariam Williams (Aryanayakam), a Tamil Christian scholar of divinity who originally hailed from the Jaffna peninsula of Ceylon. The poet's stopover in the Malay peninsula afforded an opportunity for a rapturous welcome by Indian and Ceylon Tamils as well as Gujarati Khojas and Banias. The reception given to the poet by the Indian Association in Singapore attracted a large number of ordinary Indians - small traders, motor-car drivers, security guards from a variety of communities including Sikh, Pathan

and Punjabi Muslims; Tamil Hindus and Muslims; and Gujarati Bhatias, Khojas and Bohras.

Tagore's gracious host in Singapore was an Iranian businessman, Mohammed Ali Namazi, who had come to Southeast Asia via Madras. Suniti Chattopadhyay was struck by the admiration in which this Shia Muslim family held 'Hindu civilization' and found himself arbitrating in intra-family debates on the precise nature and direction of the 'Aryan' link between Iranians and 'the Brahman and Kshatriya castes' of India.¹³

Tagore's moment in the Malay peninsula gave him a chance to have a conversation with the Chinese literati. The Chinese had named the Indian poet Chu Chen-tan (Thunder and Sunlight of India) based on the following equations: Rabi=Tan=Morning Sun, Indra=Chen=Thunder, India=Thien-chu=Heavenly Kingdom (an ancient Chinese name for India). Among the Malay Chinese Tagore interacted with was the barrister Song Ong Siang who had authored a book titled One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore, 1819-1919 in 1923. Another was Dr Lim Boon Keng who had recently completed an English translation of The Li-Siao: an elegy on encountering sorrows by the fourth century B.C. Chinese poet Qu-yuan. Tagore was much enchanted by the life, work and death of Qu, who had in the end drowned himself in the Mi-Lo river in Hunan. Once Lim sent him a copy of his manuscript, Tagore wrote a foreword for the book in Penang.¹⁴

A trip to the Malay peninsula was unthinkable without including a visit to Malacca. From Malacca the sea presented a serene spectacle. The ocean beach was spread out in front of the poet in the shape of a half moon. The color of the shallow waters made the sea look as if it was clad in the earth's saffron end of a *sari*. On the left were coconut trees leaning on one another for support.¹⁵ A group of Punjabi Hindu, Muslim and Sikh men came to pay their homage to the

poet in Malacca. According to the Muslim, Tagore was not only a poet of the highest caliber but by the grace of Khudatallah had also attained *tassawuf* or enlightenment of a Sufi mystic. But the idyll was soon to be rudely disturbed. Subbaya Naidu came to Malacca to tell Tagore about the dismal condition of Indian labourers on the rubber plantations. Some of the British rubber barons seemed unhappy with the Indian poet's 'triumphal progress' through the Malay peninsula. On August 2, 1927, the *Malay Tribune* published an editorial on 'Dr Tagore's Politics' which was a blistering attack on the poet for something he had purportedly written in the *Shanghai Times*. Tagore was quoted as having said: 'Asia prepare her weapons in her armouries for a target which is bound to be the heart of Europe'. The poet had actually written or said nothing to the Chinese paper. When he had visited China in 1924, he had been greatly disturbed to see the brutal use of Sikh armed police against the Chinese in Shanghai and written a Bengali article protesting against the British practice of using Indian troops overseas. An English translation of the article was published in the *Modern Review* in early 1927, which then was recycled in garbled form in the *Shanghai Times* and the *Malay Tribune*. An energetic young Tamil scholar in Malaya noticed the distortions and the Indian paper *Malayan Daily Express* published a strong rejoinder under the title 'Anti-Tagore Bubble Pricked: An Object Lesson in Dishonest Journalism'.

On August 16 Tagore set off from Penang on board the *Kuala* for Singapore on his way to the Dutch East Indies. He had always been less enthused by Indian military conquests in Southeast Asia than by the processes of cultural interaction facilitated by 'Hindu Brahmanas' and 'Buddhist Shramanas'. As the *Plancius* journeyed from Singapore across the straits of Malacca towards Batavia Tagore wrote his poem 'Srivijayalakshmi' celebrating the renewal of a bond after a thousand-year separation.¹⁶ The Srivijaya empire had given its patronage to the

Buddhist university at Nalanda and enjoyed friendly ties with the Pala kingdom of Bengal; both had suffered military defeat at the hands of the Cholas of south India in the 1020s. A leading Javanese poet Doetadilaga (Timboel) composed a long and classical response to Tagore's poem: "Remember how we never could believe in days past that our love would know separation; perfect was our harmony, one our thought, one our soul and one our body, - the unity of God and creature nigh. Verily I saw in you my elder brother guiding me in the ways of the world, teaching me scripture, tongue and behavior, and all that we need to exist."¹⁷

A full exploration of Java had to wait until a pilgrimage had been made to Bali.¹⁸ Tagore was soon to discover how 'Hindu' religious sentiment and ritual pervaded life in Bali, but in very distinctive form. During a silent drive with the 'king' of Karengasem a gap in the surrounding forest revealed the blue ocean. The king at once uttered the Sanskritic word '*samudra*' (ocean). Seeing that Tagore was astonished and thrilled, he gave further synonyms for ocean - '*sagara, abdhi, jaladhya*'. He then recited: '*saptasamudra* (the seven seas), *saptaparbata* (the seven mountains), *saptavana* (the seven forests), *sapta-akash* (the seven skies)'. Having given a rather difficult Sanskrit word *adri* for mountain, he then rattled off: 'Sumeru, Himalaya, Vindhya, Malaya, Hrishyamuka' - all names of Indian mountains. At one place a small river was flowing below the mountain. The king muttered on: 'Ganga, Jamuna, Narmada, Godavari, Kaveri, Saraswati' - names of key rivers in north and south India. Tagore reflected: 'In our history Bharatvarsha (India) had realized its geographical unity in a special way.' That mode of imagining the unity of natural and sacred space had crossed the great eastern ocean to reach distant islands. Tagore also noted that neither the names of the Indus and the five rivers of the Punjab nor that of the Brahmaputra flowing through Assam figured in Balinese vocabulary. He

concluded that these regions were not culturally part of the ancient India that had spread its influence across the Bay of Bengal at a particular moment in history.¹⁹

Upon arriving at the palace, Tagore and his companions found four Brahman priests worshipping Buddha, Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu.²⁰ The next day some Brahman *pandits* arrived with a set of coconut-leaf manuscripts - one of them the 'Bhishmaparva' (chapter on Bhishma) of the Mahabharata. Arjuna was their ideal man. But there were subtle variations. Shikhandi, the half-man and half-woman, who rode on Arjuna's chariot to undermine Bhishma's ability to fight, had turned in the Balinese version into Srikanti, Arjuna's wife. The differences in the Southeast Asian versions of the great epics Ramayana and Mahabharata enabled Tagore through comparative study to advance some very insightful interpretations of plains-forest tension as well as issues of race and gender that animate these stories. In the Malay world Ram and Sita were portrayed as brother and sister who were married. Tagore tended to accept this version as the original, something that had been suppressed in later renderings within India. Such an interpretation sustained Tagore's point about marriage as metaphor in the epics – in this case, Sita and Ram representing the line etched by the plough and the green of the newly sprouting crop respectively, both children of mother earth and yet bound in wedlock.²¹ If Malay literature had recreated the Indian epics as their own, Balinese dance depicted tales related in the Indian Puranas. But the 'Hindu' ethos of the island was no bar to Arab Muslims, Gujarati Khoja Muslims and Chinese merchants conducting trade.²² After his departure from the island Rabindranath wrote one of his most beautiful poems, 'Bali', which was later renamed more generically 'Sagarika' (Sea Maiden) of which the opening verse read:

Sagara jale sinan kori sajala elo chule

bashiachhile upala-upakule.

Shithila peetabash

matir pare kutilarekha lutilo charipash.

Nirabaran bakshe taba, nirabharan dehe

chikan sona-likhan usha ankia dilo snehe.

Makarachura mukutkhani pori lalatpare

dhanukbaan dhorī dakhin kare

danranu raj-beshi

Kahinu “ami eshechhi pardeshi”.

(Having bathed in the sea with your wet tresses

you sat on the rocky beach.

Your loose yellow robe

drew a forbidding line around you on the earth.

On your uncovered breasts and unadorned body

the morning sun painted a gentle golden hue.

With a *makara*-crested crown on my forehead

bow and arrow in hand

I appeared royally adorned

And said, “I have come from another land”.)

Tagore’s pleasure in discovering India in Bali was disturbed only by news of the appearance of Katherine Mayo’s best-selling pot-boiler *Mother India*. Sitting on a hilltop at Munduk, Tagore wrote an angry denunciation of the book that was published in *The Manchester*

Guardian and later reprinted in the American Rev. J. T. Sunderland's book *India in Bondage*.

From Bali Tagore travelled to Surabaya on the predominantly Muslim island of Java. It was sugar from here, he wrote in one of his letters, that now went into the *sandesh* (Bengali sweet) made by the famous confectioner, Bhim Chandra Nag, of the Bowbazaar area in Calcutta.

Hosted by the family of the seventh *monkonegoro* of Suryakarta, he was amazed by the extent to which stories of the Ramayana and Mahabharata suffused the dance and drama of the Muslim Javanese. The islands known as the Dutch Indies could be more appropriately named, according to Tagore, as 'Vyas Indies'. One evening the theme of the dance would be the fight between Indrajit, the educated demon-prince of Lanka, and Hanuman, the monkey; on another the sultan's brother would himself play the role of Ghatotkacha, a Mahabharata character, who had undergone considerable creative transformation in the Javanese variant of the epic. The verandah of the raja's home was decorated with beautiful silk scrolls on which events of the Ramayana were painted. The poet inaugurated a new road in Suryakarta, called Tagaro Straat. The temple ruins at Prambanan reminded him of Bhubaneswar in Orissa. In Yogyakarta Tagore was a guest of the *paku-alam*. The Sultan's daughters danced and the entire family got together to perform the story of the killing of the great bird Jatayu in the Ramayana. Tagore lamented the lack of more comparative studies of the epic. 'One day some German scholar will do this work,' he wrote. 'After that by protesting against or substantiating that thesis we will earn Ph.D.'s in the university.'²³

A visit to the great Saiva-Buddhist temple complex of Borobodur proved to be something of an anti-climax. Tagore found it to be big in scale but not in majesty,²⁴ but he was rather more generous in his assessment in his poem 'Borobodur'. On the ship *Maier* travelling from Java to

Singapore Tagore wrote what was to become one of his most popular songs:

Sakaruna benu bajaye ke jai, bideshi naye

*tahari ragini lagilo gaye.*²⁵

(Who goes playing that plaintive flute on a foreign boat

I can feel the touch of that melody.)

Another very well-known song *She Din Dujane* was composed in Southeast Asia at this time. As he witnessed a tropical storm gathering on the horizon in Penang, he wrote the rousing song – *Kharabayu boy bege charidik chhay meghe*. But it had been a hectic trip. Recalling Coleridge's lines about water everywhere in the ocean but not a drop to drink, Tagore felt he was drifting in the ocean of time and yet could not snatch even an iota of it.²⁶

Tagore pursued the Buddhist connection further in Siam on the way back. In Bangkok Tagore met the prince of Chantabun who had published multiple volumes of the Pali *tripitaka* in Thai script. His poem 'Siam' composed on October 11, 1927, gave a final expression to Tagore's search for a greater India:

Aji ami tare dekhi labo

Bharater je mahima

Tyag kori ashiachhe apon anganseema

arghya dibo tare

*Bharat bahire taba dware*²⁷.

(Today I will bear witness

to India's glory

that transcended its own boundaries

I will pay it homage
outside India at your door.)

Despite Tagore's obvious pride in 'India's entry into the universal', three features of his perspective on Southeast Asia from the Indian Ocean deserve attention. First, Tagore makes a rather self-conscious attempt to downplay the episodes of military aggression in an attempt to highlight the theme of cultural exchange. This form of strategic essentializing gives a partial view of the historical relations between the two regions, but seems clearly designed as a prescription for models that ought to be eschewed or followed in the present and the future. Second, Tagore does not treat India as a monolith in discussing the ways in which cultural influences radiated out of the subcontinent to reach the shores of Southeast Asia. By contrast, there is a story of regional differentiation within India that is told along with an attempt at periodizing the spread of such influence. The thousand-year old tie with Srivijaya was clearly one fostered by the Palas of Bengal and not by India as a whole. The attempt to date the forging of particular links across the eastern Indian Ocean is based on a study of the regionally differentiated literatures, cultural practices and histories of India. Third, the Southeast Asian negotiations with Indian cultural forms and products are regarded throughout by Tagore as a creative process conducted by active historical agents. There is no sense of hierarchy, for example, in analyzing the many versions of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. 'India's true history reflected in the many stories of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* will be seen more clearly', he writes, 'when we are able to compare with the texts that are to found here [in Southeast Asia]'.²⁸

The idea of Asia and the spirit of Asian universalism were in important ways products of

cosmopolitan thought zones created by passages across the Indian Ocean. In this sense, the continent and the ocean were not necessarily in an adversarial relationship but provided different contours of inter-regional arenas animated by flows of ideas and culture. Benoy Kumar Sarkar, writing in the *Modern Review* in the 1910s, stressed both sea-lanes and land-routes in creating what he called an 'Asia-sense'.²⁹ By the 1920s most contributors to the same journal were more enamored of the oceanic connections that spread Indian cultural influences to Southeast Asia. I have sought to make a distinction between two strands of cultural imperialism and a more generous universalism that shaped early twentieth-century discourses on this subject. During the modern age it has been a constant struggle not to allow universalist aspirations of the colonized to degenerate into universalist boasts and cosmopolitanism be replaced by bigotry. The tussle goes on in new post-colonial settings. The outcome is yet uncertain, but the ethical choice before us seems clear enough.

Malaya and Java were great Muslim societies under European colonial subjugation. It was his desire to see Muslim countries with Muslim sovereigns that led Tagore to board a Dutch aeroplane to travel to Iran and Iraq in April 1932.³⁰

Tagore's essay Parashye (In Persia) is much more than a diary or a travelogue by an acute observer of cultures. It is the closest thing to a real history among Tagore's writings based not just on philosophical musings but fairly solid empirical research. In Iran Tagore was not just any poet, but a poet of the east. 'For the Persians,' Tagore wrote, 'my identity has another special feature. I am Indo-Aryan...I have a blood relationship with them.'³¹ Word had also spread that Tagore had certain affinities with romantic and devotional Persian poets and it was the brotherhood of Sufi poets, which eventually turned out to be the more emotionally charged

aspect of the relationship. European race theory took second place to Indo-Persian poetry as the ground for commonality. Shades of Aryanism were drowned in the depths of Sufism. There was absolutely no occasion, Tagore asserted, when the Persians made him feel that they belonged to another society or religious community.³²

With his main identity established as a poet and an honorary Sufi, the highlight of his visit turned out to be the encounter with Saadi and Hafiz in Shiraz. Tagore had made Hafiz's acquaintance as a boy through his father's translations from the Persian. Hafiz had also been a favorite of the nineteenth-century Bengali social reformer Raja Rammohun Roy who quoted the Sufi poet to good effect in his Tuhfat-ul-Muahuddin. Overwhelmed by an effusive welcoming address with references to Saadi's soul wafting in the air and Hafiz's satisfied smile being reflected in the joy of his countrymen, Tagore pointed out that the only weight on his side of the scale was that he was present in Iran in person. Hafiz had received an invitation in the fourteenth century from Ghiasuddin Azam Shah, the third Ilyasshahi sultan of Bengal, but if Persian traditions are to be believed his ship had been forced to turn back. Bengalis generally believed that Hafiz responded to the Ilyasshahi invitation with a poem about Bengalis having taken to crunching sugar now that they had tasted it in the form of Hafiz's Persian poetry.

At a reception in a carpeted garden surrounding Saadi's grave Tagore claimed kinship with the Sufi poets and composers of yesteryears; it was just that he used the language of the modern age. At Hafiz's graveside the custodian of the cemetery brought out a large square volume of Hafiz's *diwan* and asked Tagore to open it with a wish and his eyes shut. He had been agonizing about the blindness and prejudice that went by the name of religion and wanted India to be free of this terrible affliction. "Will the tavern's

and mingled their voices in a paeon of rejoicing...

And in return I bind this wreath of my verse

on thy forehead, and cry: Victory to Iran!

The next day he met Iran's parliamentary leaders and the poet who had translated some of his poems. He received from them an exquisitely produced volume of the poetry of Anwari.³⁶

The journey towards the Iraqi border took Tagore through Kazbin, Hamadan, Kirmanshah, Behistun and Takibustan. The poet saw the various sights that had so enthralled visitors for centuries, including Darius's carvings on the mountainside in Behistun and the glorious sculpture of the Sassanid age in Takibustan.³⁷ From his hotel room in Baghdad Tagore could see the wooden bridge over the Tigris built by General Stanley Maude, which the 28th Punjabis, 53rd Sikhs, 67th Punjabis and the 2nd and 4th Gurkhas had crossed in March 1917.³⁸ A conversation with the Christian chaplain attached to the British air force in Iraq, which was engaged in a ferocious bombing campaign against Iraqi villagers, led Tagore to reflect on the shift from sea power to air power in human history. He could see that it was extremely easy to kill the desert-dwellers from the air. The humanity of those who could be killed from afar with impunity was not especially apparent to the killers who were not at serious risk of facing retaliation. When the priest affiliated with the Iraqi air force asked him for a message, Tagore wrote:

From the beginning of our days man has imagined the seat of divinity in the upper air from which comes light and blows the breath of life for all creatures on this earth. The peace of its dawn, the splendour of its sunset, the voice of eternity in its

starry silence have inspired countless generations of men with an ineffable presence of the infinite urging their minds away from the sordid interests of daily life...If in an evil moment man's cruel history should spread its black wings to invade that land of divine dreams with its cannibalistic greed and fratricidal ferocity then God's curse will certainly descend upon us for that hideous desecration and the last curtain will be rung down upon the world of Man for whom God feels ashamed.³⁹

In a very early poem Rabindranath had wished he were an Arab bedouin. One day in Iraq he fulfilled his childhood fancy by visiting a bedouin tent. He was first served coffee - thick, bitter, black Arabic coffee. Then followed a gargantuan meal to the accompaniment of delicate music. Tagore and his male companions were deprived of the pleasure of watching a dance by the bedouin women, which only Tagore's daughter-in-law could enjoy and report on. But he was treated to a war dance by the men with whirling sticks, knives, guns and swords. Tagore was just reflecting on how different his life nurtured by the rivers of Bengal was from the struggle for existence in the desert, when the bedouin chief startled him with the language of universal humanity. "Our Prophet has taught us," the chief said, "that he is a true Muslim from whom no fellow human-being fears any harm."⁴⁰

In late May 1932 the intellectuals of Baghdad organized a civic reception in Tagore's honour. An old poet recited his poetry in a sonorous voice, which sounded to Tagore like tumultuous waves on the ocean. Once the flow of Arabic poetry had ebbed, Tagore spoke about Hindu-Muslim conflict in India. He invited his hosts to resend their message with its universalist ideal in the sacred name of their Prophet once more across

the Arabian Sea so that India could be saved from communitarian narrow-mindedness, inhuman intolerance and the degradation of liberal religion and put on the high road to unity and freedom. I can do no better than conclude with the aspirational quality of a different universalism that was perhaps best expressed by Tagore in a poem-painting signed "Baghdad May 24 1932". It can be read and heard today as an exhortation to people across the globe to awaken and weave together communities and fragments into a larger and more generous pattern of human history:

Abasan Holo Rati

Nibaiya Phelo Kalima-Molin

Gharer Koner Bati.

Nikhiler Alo Purba Akashe

Jwalilo Punyadine

Eksathe Jara Chalibe Tahara

Sakalere Nik Chine.

The night has ended.

Put out the light of the lamp
of thine own narrow corner
smudged with smoke.

The great morning which is for all
appears in the East.

Let its light reveal us
to each other
who walk on

the same
path of pilgrimage.⁴¹

1. Ibid., pp. 480-488, 511-520.

² Rabindranath Tagore, 'Africa'.

³ Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: the Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 267-270.

⁴ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2004); Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

⁵ Martha Nussbaum, 'Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism' in Joshua Cohen (ed.), *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pp.4-17.

⁶ Gopal Gandhi (ed.), *A Frank Friendship: Gandhi and Bengal* (Calcutta: Seagull, 2008), p. 336.

⁷ Hilary Putnam, 'Must We Choose Between Patriotism and Universal Reason?' in Cohen (ed.) *For Love of Country*, pp. 91-97.

⁸ My concept of colorful cosmopolitanism is to be distinguished from Nico Slate's notion of colored cosmopolitanism to describe solidarity among colored peoples of the world. See Slate's essay in this volume. Colorful cosmopolitanism is meant to evoke a kind of cosmopolitanism that springs from vernacular roots and is compatible with the best traditions of ant-colonial nationalism. There is nothing "partial" about colorful cosmopolitanism, contrary to Appiah's imposition of this limitation on rooted cosmopolitanism.

⁹ Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

10. Rabindranath Tagore, *Japane-Parashye*, pp. 14, 17-25.

11. Rabindranath Tagore to Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis, 1st Sraban, Bengali 1334, 15th July 1927, in Rabindranath Tagore, Java Jatrir Patra (Letters of a Traveller to Java) in

Rabindra Rachanabali Vol. 19 (Calcutta, 1957))

12. Rabindranath Tagore to Ramananda Chattopadhyay, 28 May, 1927, cited in Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, Rabindrajibani, Vol. 3, (3rd Edition, Calcutta, 1991), p. 312.

13. Chattopadhyay, Dweepmaya Bharat, pp. 61-69. Susan Bayly has recently pointed out the connections between British ideas about caste and ethnological race science in the later nineteenth century. See her Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age (Cambridge, 2000). It is not yet fully appreciated the extent to which Indian and Iranian intellectuals, Hindu and Muslim alike, imbibed and internalized nineteenth-century European theories about the Aryan race. Ayesha Jalal shows how the great Urdu poet Muhammad Iqbal described Indian Muslims as having combined ‘the sterling qualities of their Semitic father and the softness of their Aryan mother’. See her Self and Sovereignty: the Muslim Individual and the Community of Islam in South Asia since c. 1850 (London: Routledge, 2001). The Aryan issue is discussed further in the section below.

14. Ibid., pp. 83-86, 124-126, 235-238.

15. Tagore, Java Jatrir Diary, p. 467.

16. See Mukhopadhyay, Rabindrajibani, Vol. 3, pp. 314, 323.

17. Chattopadhyay, *Dweepmaya Bharat*, pp. 690-694.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 259-261, 272.

19. Rabindranath Tagore to Mira Devi, 31 August 1927, in Tagore, Java Jatrir Patra, pp, 483-489

20. The king himself, however, held that the rituals were inconsequential by comparison with the ultimate goal of striving for *nirvana* (salvation). See Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay, 'Gleanings' in *Maha-Bodhi* 40, 8 (August 1932), 383-84.

21. Rabindranath Tagore to Nirmalkumari Mahalanabis, 1 August 1927 in Tagore, *Java Jatrir Patra*, pp.472-474.

22. Rabindranath Tagore to Rathindranath Tagore, 7 September 1927 and to Amiya Chakravarti, 9 September 1927, in Tagore, *Java Jatrir Patra*, pp. 489-501.

23. See Rabindranath Tagore's letters to Pratima Devi, 14 September 1927, 17 September

1927; to Amiya Chakravarti, 17 September 1927; to Rathindranath Tagore, 19 September 1927; to Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis, 20 September 1927; to Pratima Devi, 26 September 1927, in Tagore, *Java Jatrir Patra*, pp. 501-519.

24. Rabindranath Tagore to Mira Devi, 26 September 1927, in Tagore, *Java Jatrir Patra*, pp. 19-521.

25. Mukhopadhyay, *Rabindrajiyani* Vol. 3, pp. 330-331.

26. Rabindranath Tagore to Amiya Chakravarty, 2 October 1927 in Tagore, *Java Jatrir Patra*, p. 526.

27. Mukhopadhyay, *Rabindrajiyani* , Vol. 3, p. 332.

28. Rabindranath Tagore to Nirmalkumari Mahalanabis, 1 August 1927, in Tagore, *Java Jatrir Patra*, p. 474.

²⁹ See Kris Manjapra, 'The Mirrored World, (Harvard University Ph.D. dissertation, 2007).

30. He also wanted one of the Muslim sovereigns to endow the Chair in Persian Studies at his university in Shantiniketan. Reza Shah Pahlavi obliged. My pilgrimage would have

been incomplete without this visit, - especially when this ancient [Persian] people has been reborn and is feeling an irresistible urge of creative activity and moving to complete fulfilment of the grandeur and freedom of a positive self-expression. It is a source of inspiration in my life. This evening of my life has been filled to the brim. (Rabindranath Tagore in Parashye (In Persia) in Rabindra Rachanabali Vol. 22 and cited in J.N. Sarkar, 'Tagore and Iran: A few side-lights on Tagore's Discovery of Persia' in Indo-Iranica (39, 1-4, 1986), pp. 81-82).

31. Ibid., p. 451.

32. Ibid.

33. *Buvad aya kih dar-i-maykadahha bi-gushayand*

Girah az kar-i-furu bastah-i ma bi-gushayand

Agar az bahr-i dil-i zahid-i khuvudbin bastand

Dil qavvidar kih bahr-i Khuda bi-gushayand.

I am grateful to Sunil Sharma of Widener Library, Harvard University, for locating the original Persian lines for me. Tagore had rendered 'tavern's door' as 'heaven's door' (swargadwar) in Bengali.

34. Rabindranath Tagore, Parashye, pp. 457-461.

35. Ibid., pp. 469-480.

36. Ibid., pp. 480-488, 511-520.

37. Ibid., pp. 488-493.

38. On the Indian troops' entry in Baghdad, see 'The War Diaries of the Mesopotamian Campaign', L/MIL/17/5/3789 (India Office Records, British Library).

39. Tagore, Parashye, p. 440.

40. Ibid., pp. 499-502.

41. Tagore, *Parashye*, pp. 495-496; Rabindranath Tagore, *Sphulinga* in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol 27 (Calcutta: Viswabharati, 1965), p. 3.