

Patriotic Poems of Rabindranath Tagore: Awakening the Soul to Restore India's Lost Glory

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ABSTRACT:

Rabindranath Tagore was a great poet and patriot who believed in the peaceful coexistence of human beings, races, cultures and countries. His idea of nationalism was based on assimilation rather than discrimination. He propagated the idea of social harmony among human beings and decried wars fought by nations for selfish, material gains. He was against any kind of bloodshed and firmly believed in the Indian thought of universal humanism; the same is reflected in his poems, and he now occupies a high place among the Indian poets. The present research paper explores Tagore's poems that express these feelings of national consciousness. In these, he tries to awaken the soul of Indians and reanimate the lost glory of the past. The interpretations of these poems reflect patriotism without any sense of alienation or hate towards anyone. Tagore desired to awaken the Indian society and encourage them to walk alongside the rest of the world on the path to progress and freedom. His goal was to achieve real freedom, i.e. freedom of the soul, through enlightenment, contrary to the contemporary conflicts between nations that result in discrimination and the warmongering idea of nationalism.

Keywords:

nation, freedom, soul, social, awakening, progress

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Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore was a great Indian patriot of the twentieth century. He was not actively involved in politics but was concerned about the suffering of Indians. He involved himself in social reforms, and his writings contributed to the awakening of the Indian society at the time, thereby playing a role in the national struggle for independence. His presence is still felt in India's social life, and his writings are still relevant for an individual's awakening. The narrow outlook of the average Indian had created a clash of the various castes and creeds, resulting in an environment of hatred and prejudice and causing India's fall. Tagore's diverse writings, art, music,

education and social reforms give a comprehensive view of freedom. He believed in the unification of diverse castes, creeds, classes and cultures under one umbrella for the formation of a nation and the concept of nationalism. This cultural enterprise, which includes literature and religion, revives the rich heritage of the past in the people's collective memory for consolidation of the various groups.

Tagore was born in 1861, four years after the mutiny of 1857, when the inception and gradual crystallisation of resistance were taking place. At the time, the elite political class maintained a good relationship with the British rulers for narrow class interests. On the other

hand, many Indians hated the English and rejected their rule. However, Tagore believed in the amalgamation of civilisations and cultures. It was the initial phase of the Indians' political awakening; the moderate leaders believed in the British and thought that India would be ready for their government in the future. The Indian masses were not concerned about India's status as a nation and required nothing more than food, clothing and shelter (*Roti, Kapda and Makaan*). However, that, too, was denied by the British, causing grievances. There was no system to convey the people's grievances or rightful demands and seek a solution. This neglect resulted in fertile grounds for protest.

Tagore recognised the flaw in the general public's detachment from politics. He was a believer in the power of truth and wanted to arouse the force of courage in Indians through spiritual and social awakening. He was a firm believer in the Indian heritage and civilisation. He believed in the awakening of the spirit and empowering of the mind to overcome individual threats and the subjugation of the soul. He believed that a spiritually awakened and mentally empowered individual could overcome subjugation and facilitate social change, which, in turn, would result in the building of the nation.

Although there was a lack of education in India during Tagore's period, spirituality existed all over the country. It was part of the collective consciousness of Indians. Bankim Chandra used this spiritual heritage and force in his 1882 novel *Anandamath* to create the image of India as the Mother Goddess. This image became an integral part of the discourse of Indian nationalism. It represented the motherland providing shelter to native Indians and the colonisers as invaders exploiting its resources. It was emphasised that the children (Indians) must protect the honour of their mother and free her from the chains of slavery. The nationalists used this ideology of nationalism in the early years of the twentieth century against the colonisers. Tagore also wrote

many songs on spiritual awakening. This spiritual unity provided a common platform for people to work towards the common cause of freeing the motherland. According to Goswami (2013), "It is in this spiritual search for culture and cultural identity that Indian nationalism expressed its distinction from the western territorial and political concept of the nation" (p. 157). The contemporary nationalist spiritual environment influenced Tagore's writings and expressed the sentiments of Indian culture.

Tagore occupied a high place among the contemporary poets of his time. Buffet (1916) mentioned that the "recipient of the Nobel prize for poetry, enjoys popularity perhaps exceeding that of every other living native exponent of Asiatic thought to the west" (p. 248). His writings spread Indian thought to the West, changing the world's perception of the country. Tagore expressed Indian teachings of spirituality with a "poet's fervour, a modern man's rationalism, and an optimism distinctive of sunset lands" (Buffet, 1916, p. 249).

Tagore acknowledged his debt to his race, country and family's past. He was influenced by his father. According to Urquhart (1916), he was brought up in a family where the *Upanishads* were used daily in family worship, and these, along with the teachings of Buddha, influenced and endowed his growth (p. 400).

The Patriotic Poems of Rabindranath Tagore

Freedom is a patriotic poem. In it, Tagore wishes for a bright future for his motherland. The contemporary state of India in the twentieth century was sad, and the future also seemed dismal. But Tagore imagined a country free from worries. Though "fear, the phantom demon, shaped by your distorted dreams" (Tagore, 1994, p. 320) narrates the gloomy future in his imagination, his love for the motherland seeks freedom from this thought. The poem refers to the social evils that have been prevalent in Indian society for centuries. Tagore condemned social

evils such as caste-based discrimination, lack of education, child marriage and superstition, which bent the head of the nation. These were hurdles in the progress of the nation and a burden that had stopped the country's advancement. The world was progressing, but these social evils had divided Indian society into narrow areas of thought, impeding the vision of a progressive country. The society's eyes had been closed to the bright future of the country, a future that was possible only once the people overcame their fears and eradicated the prevalent social evils. It was as though the country was asleep, inactive like the stillness of the night, but, to Tagore (1994), hope for a bright future was "the star that speaks of truth's adventurous path" (p. 320). The star is a symbol of light and hope, and it indicates a better future for the country. But to change the condition of the country from the present gloomy state to a prosperous and enlightened one, the society had to be awakened. In the poem, the condition of the country is also compared to a ship with bad luck that is unable to sail because its sails are not appropriately arranged. Tagore wishes to get rid of this bad luck that plagues India. India was not progressing due to the society's disorganised state, there was nobody to give it direction. The country's condition is compared to that of a ship being driven by an almost-dead person. These lines express Tagore's pain at the subjugated condition of Indians:

Freedom from the insult of dwelling in a puppet's world, where movements are started through brainless wires, repeated through mindless habits; where figures wait with obedience for a master of show to be stirred into a moment's mimicry of life. (Tagore, 1994, p. 320)

This excerpt describes the colonised state of India under the British and refers to the racial discrimination against Indians. There is an indication of India being ruled according to the whims of the British and being remotely controlled by the government in Britain. The

imitation of western lifestyle by Indians is also mentioned as is the treatment meted out to the Indians by the British.

Poem 38 in *Collected Poems and Plays* is also a patriotic poem that expresses Tagore's love for his motherland. The entire poem is filled with patriotic fervour. Tagore feels blessed to be born in India. The poem expresses his love, pain and concern for the poor state of the motherland. Love for his country is the most important to him; he describes it as his treasure. In his heart, the fragrance of the flowers of his country is the best gift. The beauty of the shining moon gives him a satisfaction which he cannot find anywhere else in the world. "The first light revealed to my eyes was from her own sky" describes his birth in his native land, and "let the same light kiss them before they are closed forever" expresses his wish to breathe his last in his native place (Tagore, 1994, p. 341). This wish of wanting to die on native land was one of the most common thoughts of the patriots of the time, including Tagore.

Tagore believed in the Indian philosophy of the supremacy of freeing the soul, and his thinking was "rooted in the ancient Indian Culture" (Salamatullah, 1960, p. 134). In Poem 27 he has addressed Indians as "brothers" and told them not to be ashamed of their subjugated condition under the dominant colonisers. Their simplicity has been mentioned as a good quality, akin to a white robe. White is the symbol of purity, innocence, goodness, brilliance, illumination, spirituality and humility. In the poem, the quality of humility has been called the crown of Indians. Freedom has been defined as freedom of the soul, which relates to the Indian philosophy of the nature of the soul. The spirit of human beings should be free. There may be physical bounds on the body, but the soul cannot be forcibly controlled. Tagore also talks about the spiritual development of Indians in particular and describes the Almighty as supreme. Worldly things such as pride and greatness are temporary and perishable,

whereas the soul is permanent, and a soul devoted to God is free from all thought restrictions.

Swami Vivekananda (1907), in his lecture delivered in London on 05 November 1896, described the nature of the soul as fire available in flint; dry wood and friction are necessary to bring it out. According to him, “this fire of freedom and purity is the nature of every soul, and not a quality, because qualities can be acquired and therefore can be lost. The soul is one with Freedom, and the soul is one with Existence, and the soul is one with knowledge” (n.p.). He further stated, “You are pure already, you are free already. If you think you are free, free you are this moment, and if you think you are bound, bound you will be” (n.p.). Tagore has propagated the same idea of freedom of the soul in Poem 27.

Poem 43 also expresses Tagore’s love for the nation—each line is filled with the flavour of patriotism. His love for the motherland is evident in his wish for the prosperity of the country. He conveys that people can thrive when their country is prosperous. A patriot and an enlightened person thinks about the prosperity and happiness of his country. Tagore had a broad vision, and he thought about the holistic prosperity of his country. He wished for social harmony, abundance of resources in people’s homes and the market, sufficient agricultural produce in fields and forests and availability of adequate land, water and air for all. Tagore also wished for a country of awakened people, stating, “Let the promises and hopes, the deeds and words of my country be true, my God” (Tagore, 1994, p. 343). “Let the lives and hearts of the sons and daughters of my country be one, my God” describes his wish for the peaceful coexistence of people of diverse castes, creeds, genders, religions and regions. He gave equal importance to male and female Indians by using the words “sons and daughters” (Tagore, 1994, p. 343). It shows his vision for gender equality.

“THY CALL HAS sped over all countries of the world” is poem 59 (Tagore, 1994, p. 349). It is a prayer for the country’s freedom from its

adversaries. The line, “The day is come. / But where is India?” is repeated in all the five stanzas (Tagore, 1994, p. 349). The line seems grammatically incorrect; grammatically, it should have been “the day has come” or “the day is coming”. But the usage here is deliberate and conveys a specific hidden message. It is in simple present tense, which is used to denote something universal, such as the proverb “time is money”. Tagore has tried to express his thoughts about the tide of global change through his poem. Most of the world’s countries were on the path of progress, but India was under a spell of despair and lassitude. Tagore prays to bring India out of this state of despair. According to Robert Charles Lee (2018), “Time is come” is an English idiom and a euphemism for some being who is about to die. It was used more often in the past than it is used in the modern times (n.p.). In this sense, “The day is come” can be interpreted as conveying the last moment of despair and lassitude (Tagore, 1994, p. 349) giving way to action, for people to overcome the worry and despair and move towards progress and independence alongside the other countries of the world. In the given poem, Tagore expresses his apprehensions about India’s slow progress and requests the Almighty to bequeath them with victory. India had to move forward with the other countries of the world despite the odds.

Tagore has asked the people to face the challenges and defy the odds in the path of progress. The phrase “prison of illusions” means that such hurdles are insubstantial and daring efforts can break through the delusion (Tagore, 1994, p. 349). “Her listless arms are idle” describes the lethargic attitude of the Indian society towards progress and freedom, and the line “ashamed and futile her days and nights, lacking in joy of life” expresses Tagore’s pain due to the country’s subjugation by the colonisers (Tagore, 1994, p. 350). It also refers to the glorious past of the country and compares it to the contemporary condition. In addition, the melancholic state of the Indian society is described. Through the poem,

Tagore requests the Almighty to hear his appeal and bring new hope to the country. Here, the country has been personified as a being who is in a lifeless state and requires renewing.

In the next stanza, "The morning sun of the new age has risen/ Thy temple hall is filled with pilgrims" describes the changes taking place in the world and the rise of a new age, and "She lies on the dust in dishonour" refers to India's status as a colonised country (Tagore, 1994, p. 350). The colonisers disrespected the Indians and Indian culture and projected themselves as the superior race. Next, "deprived of her seat" (Tagore, 1994, p. 350) refers to India's degradation from the glorious position as a centre of education, trade, philosophy, culture, religious thoughts, science, mathematics, astronomy, astrology and world-famous universities like Nalanda and Takshila. In "Remove her shame", "shame" refers to the subjugated state and the evils, and "give her a place in thy house of Man" is a prayer to restore the glorious past position of India (Tagore, 1994, p. 350).

In the fourth stanza, various freedom and social reform movements that were taking place in the world are described. Tagore has expressed his pain on the dismal state of India. "Doors are shut in her house age-worn" refers to the rigid stance of the Indian society against acceptance of change (Tagore, 1994, p. 350). The Indian society had become superstitious and stagnant to change. Many social evils crept into it. India was under a state of disarray. People were hopeless about the future of the country. Tagore prayed to awake Indians from this state.

The last stanza gives some hope for the country's future, wherein it is mentioned that some people have conquered their fear and awakened their soul. Tagore believed that it was only fear and lack of confidence that were preventing people from move towards freedom. India was capable of overcoming all sorts of hurdles and achieving freedom. "Strike thy blow at her self-suspicion and despair!/ Save her from the dread of her own

pursuing shadow,/ O Lord ever awake!" means that Tagore felt that God had also not paid enough attention to India, as if He was sleeping and neglecting it (Tagore, 1994, p. 350). This poem is a prayer asking God for enough care and attention for India.

Poem 60 is also a motivational poem that decries wars for the resulting plunder and colonisation. "FROM TRIUMPH to triumph they drove their chariot over the earth's torn breast" refers to the bloodshed carried out by the power-hungry colonisers and the subsequent destruction of the nations (Tagore, 1994, p. 351). The loss of humans due to wars has been mentioned as "earth's torn breast" (Tagore, 1994, p. 351). The arrogance of the conquerors has been described as "They boasted that the undying lights of the sky fed the flame they carried/ till it conquered the night and won homage from the sullen silence / of the dark" (Tagore, 1994, p. 351).

The second part of the poem moves from the dark side of colonisation to the light of new hope. "The bell sounds" indicates a change of time, and "The sun of the new day shines upon the night's surrender of love" is about a new hope of peace in the world (Tagore, 1994, p. 351). In the line "The torch lies shrouded in its ashes", the torch symbolises the fall of the colonisers' power, and "the sky rings with the rejoicing voice" refers to freedom movements against the colonisers throughout the world, following which "Victory to the earth" indicates the peaceful coexistence of all human beings without discrimination and the cessation of wars among nations (Tagore, 1994, p. 351). Thus, Tagore was an enlightened human soul who believed in the freedom of all human beings and longed for love among them.

Poem 61 is about humanity and the freedom of the soul. "THOU HAST given us to live" means God has created all human beings and all are equal and free (Tagore, 1994, p. 351). This right to equality and freedom given by the Almighty need to be protected by all of us. Tagore asks us to protect this honour. Human beings are

the creation of God, and the glory of God depends upon the condition of His creation. Tagore has rebutted the control of physical power in this world on the soul. "Therefore in thy name we oppose the power that would plant its banners upon our soul" argues that since human beings are a creation of God, the worldly powers have no right to subjugate them (Tagore, 1994, p. 351). Here, the reference is to the discrimination prevalent in the world in the name of caste, class, race, nation or other differences. "Let us know that thy light grows dim in the heart that bears its insult of bondage" means if someone accepts the subjugation of their mind, it takes their heart away from God (Tagore, 1994, p. 351). The spirit of a subjugated person who accepts any bondage becomes low. The message of peace through love among human beings is beautifully expressed.

Poem 62 is also about the freedom of the individual. The elements of spirituality are also there in it. "I SHALL NOT wait and watch in the house for thy coming" means that Tagore believes in action instead of waiting for something to happen (Tagore, 1994, p. 352). "Let the boat drift in the midstream" symbolises starting something to achieve the goals, and "The night is pale" refers to the adverse conditions. However, "the lonely moon is playing its ferry of dreams across the sky" represents hope for success and motivates one to begin despite all odds (Tagore, 1994, p. 351). It motivates us to be bold and face the challenges even in unknown paths. "My mind has the wings of freedom / and I know that I shall cross the dark. / Let me but start on my journey, for the time flies to its end" indicates freedom of thought and free spirit (Tagore, 1994, p. 351). Tagore believed in action instead of wasting time to wait for someone to come for help. The poem is about freedom and the motivation to achieve something.

Poem 88 is about the contemporary world of hatred among nations and peoples. It expresses Tagore's pain on the bloodshed in the world for worldly treasures and the false concept of superiority. He has described the contemporary

world as "wild with the delirium of hatred" (Tagore, 1994, p. 365). The conflicts among nations resulted in cruel wars, spreading suffering and unhappiness due to their greed. The world seemed to be changed to the extent of insanity. "All creatures are crying for a new birth of thine" expresses the pain and suffering of human beings (Tagore, 1994, p. 365). At the same time, this poem is a prayer for help. Tagore's belief in incarnation to stop the chaos in the world is expressed. God is invoked to instil love in people's hearts and save humanity. The lines "Let love's lotus with its inexhaustible treasures of honey / open its petals in thy light" seek to spread love under the guidance of the Almighty (Tagore, 1994, p. 365). Tagore's prayer to God, to take away the pain of human beings, reflects universal humanism. The countries were fighting due to greed and the false ego of superiority of race. This combination of greed and ego made human beings blind to rational thought. Due to these factors, their souls died. Tagore prays for insight for these blind souls and asks God to give them the power to give up the greed. People's concern for only their own needs and interests had poisoned their wisdom. Their greed changed into never-ending thirst. Countries involved in war projected their victories, which were achieved after human bloodshed, as a symbol of pride. Tagore prays for wisdom for the warmongers and for peace and harmony in the world in his poem.

"BRING TO THIS country once again the blessed name" is a patriotic poem (Tagore, 1994, p. 367). It is in the form of a prayer, asking God to restore India's lost glory. In the past, India was a world leader, with other country looking towards it for guidance. The land was also the origin of many religions. Vedic teachings from India enlightened the other countries of the world in the past. The lines "BRING TO THIS country once again the blessed name/ which made the land of thy birth sacred to all distant lands!" describe Tagore's feelings about the same (Tagore, 1994, p. 367). The line "the land of thy birth sacred to all distant

lands” (Tagore, 1994, p. 367) is a reference to Buddha—who was born in India—and Buddhism, which spread to many countries of the world such as China and Japan. “Let thy great awakening under the *bodhi* tree be fulfilled” talks about the event of Buddha receiving enlightenment under the *Bodhi* tree (Tagore, 1994, p. 367). Tagore desired the spiritual awakening of India. The various social evils prevalent in Indian society at the time are described as the “veil of unreason” in his poem (Tagore, 1994, p. 367). These evils covered the mindset of Indians like a curtain, blinding their wisdom and preventing logical and rational thought. The contemporary state of India is described as “an oblivious night”, meaning that India was going through bad times and there was a lack of awareness about what was happening around the world (Tagore, 1994, p. 367). Social reforms and freedom movements were taking place in various parts of the world to regenerate societies, but India was not progressing towards social reform and freedom. The Indian society was in a state of slumber; there was a lack of vision and wisdom in the people. Tagore wished to revive the memories of Buddha’s awakening in India and, thereby, awaken and rejuvenate the Indian society. In the poem, God is described as a source of light without limits. Tagore’s desire for social reform and spiritual awakening is evident.

Conclusion

Rabindranath Tagore’s poems are didactic in nature and express his patriotic feelings. Specifically, they express his vision of freedom and awaken the reader’s soul to the possibility of the same. He portrayed the contemporary condition of India and was optimistic about the future of the nation, which was contrary to the prevalent defeatist atmosphere in the society. He critically analysed the situation and determined the prevalent social evils as the reason for the problems. Unity, integrity and prosperity of a nation depend upon a strong social fabric, and education, social harmony and scientific and

rational thinking form the base of any society on the path of progress. Tagore found these qualities lacking in the Indian society, and a society that lacks education, equality, social harmony and rational thinking becomes a liability, preventing the nation’s progress. To spread awareness and open the eyes of people, Tagore highlighted and criticised the social evils, sharing his optimistic vision of a bright future for the nation. He took the initiative to reform the society through his poems.

National consciousness germinates from love for the motherland. It develops from the feelings of belongingness to a country and pain and concern for the nation, while the nation’s beautiful landscapes satisfy these feelings. For Tagore, the fragrance of the flowers of India was the best gift in the world. Further, the contemporary elite class of Indian society at the time was impressed by Western thought and imitated the colonisers’ pompous lifestyle. Contrary to this, Tagore believed in the Indian philosophy, propagated simplicity and desired the spiritual development of Indians. He was a keen observer of the reforms and movements for freedom taking place across the world. Seeing that India was not a part this tide of change moved Tagore’s poetic emotions, and he expressed the same in his poems, as discussed above. He sought for India to move forward with the rest of the world. He discussed the contemporary condition, explained the reason for the degradation of the Indian society and reminded the people of their glorious past to give hope for the reanimation of the same in the near future.

Love for the motherland is the basis of patriotism, and his poems talk about the same. They also contain elements of the Indian philosophy of freedom of the soul. Thus, Tagore was an ambassador of Indian thought, whose writings spread to the West. The poems serve as a clarion call to wake up and move towards global progress and social change. They also convey Tagore’s wish for India’s prosperity and the equality of all human beings, decrying the

prevalent racial hatred. The poems urge the sleeping multitude to awaken and to restore the lost glory of India.

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