Journal of Polity & Society (2025) 17(2), 3-19

'Maitri' and 'Mukti' in Global Politics: Tagore's Search for Alternatives

RITAMBHARA MALAVIYA
University of Allahabad

The paper explores how the ideas of Rabindranath Tagore provide a useful lens to delve into the concepts and categories of contemporary international politics and proposes that his critique of nationalism and realism contributes a valuable vantage point for understanding the history of resistance to Eurocentric ideas. This scholarly legacy of opposition to the Westphalian order also provides the foundation for constructing alternatives to this order. Tagore emphasized how the Western idea of nationalism was alien to his region of the world, and how a view of society based on cooperation, rather than the nation based on competition, had historically been the mode of existence in the East. He averred that politics among nations, based on the theoretical assumption of atomistic, conflicting individuals, was detrimental to the peace and harmony of the world. He further offers a unique definition of the nation as an organization of people whose primary purpose is the acquisition of wealth and power. This exposition emphasizes the mechanical and artificial nature of the nation-state. Tagore also posits that many creative and humane capabilities are overshadowed by this organization. The paper discusses Tagore's assessment of realist ideas that were gaining attention in his time. It concludes with a discussion of what Tagore proposes as alternatives to this politics: *Mukti* (freedom) and *Maitri* (friendship and harmony) as the basis for a global society grounded in *swaraj* (self-rule).

Keywords: Tagore, nation, cooperation, harmony, Eurocentrism

Introduction

We, the famished ragged ragamuffins of the East, are to win freedom for all humanity. We have no word for 'Nation' in our language. When we borrow this word from other people, it never fits us. (Tagore 1928/1996b, p. 284)

The paper argues that the disciplinary canon of International Relations has excluded scholars from the Global South, at the cost of important interventions that could help reconceptualize the discipline. One such thinker whose insights offer alternatives to current ways of thinking is the poet, writer, and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). It is worth noting that Tagore stands out as one of the pioneers among those who initially challenged Eurocentrism in world politics, long before it was flagged as a concern in the discipline. This paper is therefore an attempt to broaden the discipline beyond the

canon of "European classical thought" (Jones, 2006, p. 2). The post-colonial approach evaluates the Orientalist assumption that non-Western peoples were mere "inert objects of knowledge," without any agency of their own (Collins, 2012, p. 14). This paper attempts to enrich scholarship by showing how they produced knowledge, derived from their traditions and synthesizing them with others, to present alternative frameworks to the Westphalian order. A close reading of Tagore's ideas and works reveals how the postulates of Eurocentric IR, often taken for granted by scholars, were questioned and contested even as they spread. Tagore's ideas are significant in this regard because their uniqueness and originality promote thinking beyond the framework of received wisdom.

The paper undertakes an analytical study of the key texts of Tagore, which include his writings, speeches, lectures, and letters, either in English or in English translation. This study also draws on existing scholarship on Tagore and seeks to analyze his ideas against the backdrop of prominent theories and debates in IR. While IR scholarship examines issues such as war, conflict, forced migration, statelessness, and the lack of interstate cooperation on critical concerns like ecological crises and nuclear weapons, mainstream IR theories offer little by way of alternative possibilities and largely remain content with their reproductive logic. This paper identifies alternative perspectives beyond Western and mainstream IR through the ideas and thought of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore's works are evaluated to highlight the limitations of mainstream IR within the Westphalian paradigm by addressing three questions: the epistemological foundations of his ideas, his critique of nationalism, and the potential of his alternative conceptualizations for rethinking IR theory. Although a vast body of literature on Tagore exists, comparatively little work addresses his contribution to international relations theory. Among the available studies is an introductory article by Datta (2023) on Tagore's cosmopolitanism. Similarly, Aparna Devare's work on Tagore and Gandhi offers insights into his prospective contribution to dialogical IR (Devare, 2018). A notable study by Shani (2022) engages with Tagore's ideas on nationalism and examines their relevance for a post-Westphalian IR. Shani argues that Tagore's primary contribution lies in proposing "Asia as a method" for IR theory. However, Shani's attempt to situate Tagore's ideas within Tenshin Okakura's Pan-Asian paradigm is not grounded in a deeper reading of Tagore's work. Although Okakura profoundly influenced Tagore's ideas on Eastern civilization, Tagore did not conceive these ideas as a rival hegemonic paradigm to the West. Tagore advocated for cultural convergence rather than the assertion of the superiority of any single culture. While Okakura's ideas ultimately contributed to a nationalist-imperialist vision of Japan, Tagore's thought constituted a powerful critique of imperialistic tendencies in all forms, whether originating in the West or emerging from counter-assertions within Eastern cultures (see Sengupta, 2009). Shani also highlights the relationality inherent in Tagore's ideas. However, in the absence of engagement with their epistemological foundations, he is unable to explore

Tagore's approach in depth. This paper, in contrast, through an extensive analysis of Tagore's texts, asserts that *maitri* and *mukti* represent Tagore's key contributions to understanding challenges in international relations. It further suggests that Tagore's relational thinking offers a distinctive balance between individuality and community, and between freedom and harmony—an equilibrium often missing in other relational perspectives.

This paper endeavors to understand Tagore's ideas by first examining how he emerged as a key thinker who challenged Eurocentric thought during its global expansion. It then highlights his distinctive contributions to the theorization of world politics. The paper is organized as follows. The first section examines how Tagore questioned the ideas and practices of the Westphalian order. The second section looks at his epistemology, while the third explores his concept of nationalism. The fourth section addresses Tagore's evaluation of realist ideas, and the fifth considers *mukti* and *maitri* as countervailing foundations of *swaraj*. The paper concludes by reflecting on Tagore's continuing relevance for the theorization of international relations.

Tagore and the Westphalian Order

The writings of Tagore offer an insightful viewpoint for critically analyzing the Westphalian "order." Scholars have assessed how the discipline of IR often takes it for granted that ideas and institutions originating in Europe spread to the rest of the world, and that other countries were socialized into these norms of civilization (Jones, 2006; Kayaoglu, 2010; Çapan, 2017). Kayaoglu points out that there is an assumption in IR academia that "with Westphalia, European states had solved the anarchy problem, either through cultural or contractual evolution." However, the non-European world remained in anarchy until it acquired the "standards of civilization" through contact with the West (Kayaoglu, 2010, p. 193). This Eurocentric or "Westphalian narrative" ignores that norms in international relations did not develop in isolation but within a world characterized by interdependence (Çapan, 2017; Kayaoglu, 2010). Moreover, scholars have highlighted the hierarchy of knowledge, wherein knowledge produced in and about the Global North is privileged over that of the Global South. As Grovogui (2006, p. 6) observes, "international knowledge (including theory) seldom encompasses the totality of memories, understandings, and interpretations of international events and thought forms." Finally, scholars have observed that the Westphalian narrative functioned as "an ideological tool" that normalized the oppression and colonization of those deemed uncivilized by the 'civilized' (Kayaoglu, 2010, p. 195). In this context, Jones (2006) underscores the violent processes through which the international society expanded, subjugating and killing others.

This study maintains that this purported "civilizing" of the periphery by Europe was contested. While the construction of the colonized as the "barbaric Other" is now widely analyzed in the scholarship discussed above, Tagore

challenged it at the height of its ascendancy. His writings invert the binary of the civilized and barbaric by demonstrating that what was considered civilized by Europe was, in fact, barbaric and unacceptable to humanity. In his note on the Second World War, Tagore describes the "so-called civilized nations" as more barbaric than Genghis Khan and his army of Mongols (Tagore, 1941/2007c, p. 771). In another instance, he criticizes this kind of civilization for its "cannibalistic" tendencies (Tagore, 1917/2009b, p. 8).

Tagore was deeply conscious of the physical and epistemic coercion of the West and attempted to resist this one-sided imposition of norms and institutions upon the East. His work appraises Western civilization and associated institutions, such as the nation-state and realist politics. Significantly, Tagore's approach was not merely a "provincial" rejection of these ideas and institutions in his search for cultural authenticity. He tried to present his ideas before the international public and initiated a dialogue with renowned writers, philosophers, and humanists of his time, including Romain Rolland, C.F. Andrews, W.W. Pearson, and L.K. Elmhirst. These discourses were aimed at creating space for global cooperation in the production of knowledge. His ideas were thus not solely focused on the local audience and did not articulate a philosophy that would have only local connotations. An analysis of the epistemological foundations of Tagore's thought helps throw light on his rejection of the Westphalian order and the alternatives he advanced.

Epistemological Foundations

Tagore rejects the notion of nationalism that underpins the Westphalian order. It is essential to comprehend the epistemological foundations of Tagore's thought, which may have been alien to contemporary Western thought, to appreciate his objections to the cult of nationalism. This clearly illustrates that European ideas, though rapidly spread across the world due to colonization, were neither uncontested nor the only ways of understanding the world. These alternative perspectives, though overshadowed in the Westphalian world, continued as parallel genealogies offering alternatives to capitalist modernity and its discontents.

Tagore lived at a time when multiple ideas contested for prominence in the public sphere in India. His ideas evolved over time through his interaction with these crosscurrents. The modern influences on Tagore can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when Raja Rammohan Roy laid the foundation for socio-religious reforms in India and established the Brahmo Sabha, which later became the Brahmo Samaj. The Brahmo Sabha questioned prevalent socio-religious practices such as sati, idol worship, and polytheism, drawing ideas both from the Western liberal canon and from ancient Indian texts such as the Upanishads in developing its critique. Tagore's father was a prominent Brahmo leader, and this Brahmo heritage undoubtedly continued to influence Tagore's life and thinking. His refusal to surrender his reason to "shastric injunctions" and blind conventions

and customs (Tagore, 1921/1997b, p. 76) reflects this legacy. On the other hand, Tagore grew up at a time of religious revivalism, which emerged as a reaction to the spread of Western ideas and values among Indians. The revivalists rejected what they considered cultural importation from the West and set out to revive the ancient Hindu past in their search for an authentic self. Tagore's initial involvement with the Swadeshi movement depicts the impact of these influences. However, he soon became disillusioned with the narrow cult of ethno-nationalism and the fanaticism against the "other" that the movement engendered. As a result, he parted ways with the Swadeshi agitation (Guha, 2009; Datta, 2023; Kaviraj, 2020).

Tagore therefore rejected the Swadeshi movement's quest for an authentic self in his effort to synthesize different traditions. This approach is best reflected in the music he evolved, *Rabindra Sangeet*, which fuses the classical Indian music tradition with Bengali folk and Western musical forms. Tagore transcended any essentialized opposition between the authentic East and the authentic West by delineating diverse traditions within both cultures that could mutually enrich one another. Consequently, while he rejected crucial aspects of contemporary Western politics and culture—especially its political organization—he accepted aspects such as reason and science, which he believed could contribute to human emancipation (Collins, 2012). Tagore also eschewed a return to a dead past, instead drawing upon classical texts that illuminated his path toward freedom. He declined to sacrifice his reason and judgment to any orthodoxy or institutionalized religion, stressing that his religion was not inherited but gained through experience and growth in life (Tagore, 1931/1996e). This stance differed significantly from Gandhi's on the question of *Varnashrama Dharma*. Both Gandhi and Tagore opposed casteism, and Gandhi implemented reforms in his ashrams. Tagore, meanwhile, introduced such changes gradually in his institution so that students could accept them of their own volition rather than through compulsion. Philosophically, while Gandhi accepted the varna system, Tagore disagreed with him (Bhattacharya, 1997). Tagore contended that adherence to hereditary occupations had lost its relevance and social utility and that it resulted in a lack of creativity and freedom in the development of one's personality. This, he argued, ultimately led to a submissive mindset under colonial rule (Tagore, 1927/2007b).

It is this very quest for freedom that attracted Tagore to folk traditions such as the Bauls (wandering singers in Bengal), which became a source of inspiration for his essays and lectures, most prominently *The Religion of Man*. *Mukti*, or "freedom in truth," was therefore the core idea that inspired Tagore (Tagore, 1931/1996e, p. 112). However, owing to a distinct epistemological foundation, its content differed from the Western concept of liberty. This liberty was not the freedom of atomistic individuals to pursue their selfish interests in life regardless of one another. Tagore distinguished between liberty and the license of "unrestrained egoism" (Tagore, 1928/1996b, p. 288). He illustrated

how the Western idea of freedom was "superficial and materialistic" and how *mukti* offered an alternative to "this crude idea of liberty" (Tagore, 1928/1997a, p. 60). For Tagore, freedom implied the ability of individuals to develop their potential to the fullest, thereby realizing their full humanity. This self-realization consisted of transcending the narrow boundaries of the self (Tagore, 1931/1996e).

God is not an otherworldly idea for Tagore but rather the "Lord of life," or *jivan devata* (Tagore, 1931/1996e, p. 123). Tagore's God is a human God, an idea that reflects the realization of completeness in humanity. Accordingly, his religion was an attempt to move toward the ideal of humanity, which is realized through the process of human creativity. His ideal is not some supernatural attainment but "the idea of the humanity of our God, or the divinity of Man the Eternal" (Tagore, 1931/1996e, p. 88). Human creativity is directed toward the attainment of the inner quality or nature—what he calls the "dharma" of man. The philosophical underpinnings of his thought adopt notions such as *mukti* and *maitri* from an interpretation of the Upanishads; still, he rejects the belief in divine intervention in everyday life: "We have enough of magic in the country—magical revelation, magical healing, and all kinds of divine intervention in mundane affairs. That is exactly why I am anxious to reinstate reason on its throne" (Tagore, 1921/1997b, p. 82).

Freedom for Tagore, therefore, has two dimensions: an internal and an external. On the one hand, it refers to the freedom of the individual to develop fully; on the other hand, it concerns emancipation from all the barriers established by social conventions between human beings. Tagore's philosophy is permeated by a consciousness of unity in everything around us, and he regards freedom as inherent in overcoming the obstacles that separate us from other forms of existence (Tagore, 1931/1996e). This idea of oneness is also based on the Upanishadic ideal of the unity of all things despite their differences. Life is not a haphazard collection of disconnected units; rather, it is a mutually interdependent union of different units working in coordination. Thus, Tagore observes that "interdependence gives rise to freedom" (Tagore, 1931/1996e, p. 164). This, he expounds, is the creative principle of unity (Tagore, 1931/1996e). Tagore also discusses a famous Upanishadic verse emphasizing the unity inherent in the dynamism of the world: "this world which is all movement is pervaded by one supreme unity…" (Tagore, 1931/1996e, p. 91).

What flows from this idea of unity and interdependence is that, unlike the atomistic individual of modern Western philosophy, Tagore's individual is relational. Unlike the predicament of Hobbesian man, who is solitary, Tagore maintains that man "misses himself when isolated; he finds his own larger and truer self in his wide human relationship" (Tagore, 1931/1996e, p. 88). He emphasizes the "truth of human unity," which implies that "we have our greatest delight when we realize ourselves in others, and this is the definition of love"

(Tagore, 1931/1996e, p. 102). However, it must be pointed out that this harmony does not denote a hierarchical organizational structure. On the contrary, harmony is achieved only through the maintenance of the essence of different things. For Tagore, it is harmony (*maitri*), and not homogeneity, that is central. Harmony is a core element in Tagore's scheme, and he often deploys the metaphor of music to elucidate this idea. For instance, true music can emerge only through harmony, as in the *vina* (a stringed instrument in Indian classical music), which produces beautiful music only when all its strings, and the instrument as a whole, are tuned and crafted in a harmonious manner (Tagore, 1921/1997b).

Here, Tagore synchronizes two distinct ideas: one that necessitates a community with a shared purpose and another that believes in the preservation of individuality. His perspective of relationality thus protects the individual's freedom from the community (as entailed in his idea of *mukti*) while simultaneously asserting that freedom is actualized in a voluntary union (the idea of *maitri*). Tagore's conceptualization draws on Western rationality, which enables individuals to choose their way of life free from orthodox norms. It also embraces the ideals of the Upanishads, which provide normative goals for individuals situated within a web of relationships, and adopts Sufi philosophy, which demonstrates practical ways of living with freedom and harmony.

Remarkably, scholars have recently attempted to theorize relationality in IR by assimilating diverse traditions from across the world (see Kurki, 2020; Qin, 2018). However, some dilemmas are still unresolved: "some versions of these ancient relational cosmologies such as dharma and Confucianism were also hierarchical in different ways and we argue that problematizing these through an open, engaging, and continuing dialogue is also imperative" (Trownsell, Behera, & Shani, 2022, p. 795). Tagore's ideas, in contrast, are developed through a continuous dialogue between traditions, which problematize several racial and religious hierarchies that subordinate human beings to privileged orders. Remarkably, scholars have recently attempted to theorize relationality in IR by assimilating diverse traditions from across the world (see Kurki, 2020; Qin, 2018). However, some dilemmas are still unresolved: "Some versions of these ancient relational cosmologies, such as dharma and Confucianism, were also hierarchical in different ways, and we argue that problematizing these through an open, engaging, and continuing dialogue is also imperative" (Trownsell, Behera, & Shani, 2022, p. 795). Tagore's ideas, in contrast, are developed through a continuous dialogue between traditions, which problematize several racial and religious hierarchies that subordinate human beings to privileged orders.

Understanding Tagore's "Non-Nation"

Tagore's critique of nationalism has often been misinterpreted by scholars like Asok Sen (as cited in Chatterjee, 2011, p. 116), who argued that Tagore was not a critic of nationalism per se, but only of competitive and self-seeking forms

of nationalism. This interpretation has been questioned by scholars such as Partha Chatterjee (2011), who avers that Tagore's critique was more substantive. This section, therefore, scrutinizes the substance of Tagore's ideas on nationalism, or his notion of the "non-nation," as Chatterjee (2011) terms it. As discussed above, Tagore's ideas can be understood more comprehensively if one notes that his alternative philosophy, which he discusses in detail in *The Religion of Man*, allows little scope for the concept of nationalism. This philosophy is based on the ideas of universal compassion, derived from the Upanishads and the Sufi tradition. This perspective is quite alien to academia trained in studying the Westphalian world of nation-states, who often take it for granted (see Özkirimli, 2010).

Tagore evaluates the anti-colonial movement of his time, which vowed to expel the British but unconsciously mimicked their form of political organization, namely, the nation (Collins, 2012). Here, it is worth noting that Ashis Nandy posits that colonialism was "a shared culture" between the colonizers and the colonized, whereby the colonized were induced or coerced to "accept new social norms and cognitive categories" (Nandy, 1983, pp. 2–3). The colonial mindset seeped so deeply into the social psyche that even resistance to colonialism was often channeled through the categories created by the colonizers (Nandy, 1983). However, Tagore transgresses this colonial mindset by refusing to accept the categories offered by the colonizers: "You will say: form yourselves into a nation, and resist this encroachment of the Nation. But is this the true advice, that of a man to a man? Why should this be a necessity?" (Tagore, 1917/2009c, pp. 52–53). This clearly illustrates that Tagore regards nationalism as a "derivative discourse" (Chatterjee, 1986). The various dimensions of nationalism that Tagore critiques can be understood in this backdrop. A study of Tagore's essays on nationalism sheds light on three aspects: first, nationalism as a response to the discontents of capitalist modernity; second, nationalism as an ideology based on the mechanization and centralization of the nation-state; and third, the fanaticism inherent in it.

Nationalism as a Discontent of Capitalist Modernity

Tagore, like Gandhi, opposes the materialistic aspects of Western civilization, marked by a relentless pursuit of wealth and power. He extends this critique by observing that the organization called the "nation" itself reflects this organized drive to grab profits. Evidently, industrialization and capitalism had drastically transformed the social and economic organization of the West, leading to a ceaseless drive for profits by the nation-states, with imperialism emerging as a result. A discussion of how Tagore defines the idea of the nation helps in understanding his opposition to nationalism. Tagore clearly recognized how the emerging idea of nationalism subordinated society to the state, creating a congruence of purposes. This subordination of society by the state is a central concern for Tagore, as it led to a loss of social vitality through the mobilization

of the masses to serve statist interests: "A nation, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose" (Tagore, 1917/2009c, p. 37).

Tagore, like no other thinker of his time, sees the link between a strong centralized nation-state, its technological power, and its economic expansion. Scholars such as Gellner (1983/2006) and Anderson (1983/2016) view the nation as an outcome of the forces of modernity. Benedict Anderson emphasizes the role of print capitalism in constructing the imagined community of the nation. Similarly, Gellner (1983/2006) shows how conditions created by industrialization contributed to the emergence of nationalism. They note the creation of homogeneous communities with standardized practices, aided by tools such as mass education and print media. However, none of these theorists focuses on the perverse consequences of this standardization—namely, fanaticism and imperialism, which Tagore rightly identifies as an underemphasized aspect of the alignment between state and society.

Tagore was particularly distressed by the two World Wars, which resulted from the rival imperial ambitions of the great powers. He viewed these conflicts as symptomatic of the decline of human civilization. Thus, at a time when the ideology of nationalism was ascendant in the colonized countries, Tagore stood out as a lone voice deconstructing nationalism and bringing concerns previously considered peripheral, such as the destructiveness of imperialism, to the center of his critique. He underscored nationalism's potential for exclusiveness and othering. One might note that, by being born in a society mostly untouched by industrialization, thinkers like Tagore and Gandhi were able to conceptualize beyond the confines of Western civilization. Through their work, the colonized world became a site of pertinent discourse, providing a powerful critique of the problems inherent in the Eurocentric mode of thinking.

Tagore's understanding of the political organization of a nation leads him not only to ponder its external impacts, such as wars and imperialism, but also to analyze its internal dimensions. This sheds light on another aspect of Tagore's opposition to nationalism: the concentration of centralized power within the nation-state.

Mechanization and Centralization of the Nation-State

For Tagore, the essence of a nation lies in its centralized structure. He is deeply apprehensive of the centralized power wielded through the state's machinery, particularly concerned that the nation-state disciplines, regulates, and erodes difference (Collins, 2012). At the heart of Tagore's opposition to nationalism is the process by which conformity is imposed across society. Tagore challenges the mechanization and centralization of life, arguing that they lead to "construction instead of creation." He warns against the suppression of man's creative powers by the large-scale processes of modern mechanized life, as well as by formal laws and regulations (Tagore, 1928/1996a). For Tagore, *swaraj* is

foremost the "swaraj of mind"—the freedom of the mind to think, judge, and create—and he reinforces the necessity of "the free play of our intellect" (Bhattacharya, 1997, p. 26). This also distinguishes him from ideologies that eulogize an organic state, which are often skeptical of dissenting views and insist on conformity of thought.

The modern nation-state, with its technologically enabled mechanization and centralization, is therefore abhorrent to Tagore's idea of a life of creativity. Though Tagore did not oppose technology per se, he was against the mechanization of life in which machinery dominates human beings, weakening their sensibilities, creativity, and autonomy over the self. He feared a centralization of life in which people became mere cogs in the wheel of the centralized state, thereby losing their *swaraj of mind*. He warns against the exploitative character of this mechanization in his plays *Mukta-Dhara* and *Rakta-Karbi* (Bhattacharya, 1997, p. 32). Concurrently, he accepts science as a bulwark against irrational and superstitious beliefs, which allowed cults of orthodox practices and vested interests to dominate people's lives, preventing them from leading fearless and free lives. However, he opposed the cult of technology because it shackled the power to think independently. Therefore, the power to think and create are the chief means to Tagore's *swaraj* (Tagore, 1921/1997b), though this is completely undermined by the mechanical and repetitive exercise of the centralized organization of the nation-state, which calls for uniformity. Mechanical obedience leads to tendencies such as fanaticism and authoritarianism within a state. These ideas help us understand the next dimension of Tagore's opposition to nationalism—the fanaticism aroused by nationalism.

The Fanaticism of Nationalism

Recent scholarship has pointed out that the Westphalian narrative, used to subjugate other societies under the logic of the white man's burden, had such a hold that even liberal-minded people of Europe could somehow justify the empire as a necessity and found themselves at "home with the empire" (Hall & Rose, 2006). However, while the empire drew its justification from such ideas, Tagore rejected this by noting that the spread of the nation-state from Europe was intertwined with the idea of racial superiority. Tagore criticizes Europe for its "exclusiveness," whereby "other" people were rendered "aliens." This, he asserts, led to racial domination and the plundering of the resources of "others" without any moral qualms (Tagore, 1917/2009b). He further pointed out that under the impact of nationalism, even those who espouse values of freedom may attempt to enslave others under the supposition that the uncivilized deserve to be treated differently (Tagore, 1917/2009a).

Tagore also highlighted the dehumanizing effects of such fanatic nationalism on human sensibilities—an insight echoed in contemporary scholarship that examines how media in different nations construct binaries of

good and evil during wars and conflicts, which leads to the dehumanization of the "enemy other," thereby numbing our sensibilities to their pain and suffering (Galtung, 2005). Tagore wrote at a time when the two World Wars brought disasters on an unprecedented scale. He observed how narrow, inward-looking nationalism was aroused to secure public support for war and described nationalism as a "powerful anesthetic" that numbs us to others' suffering (Tagore, 1917/2009c, p. 61). Tagore finds that narrow love for one's nation leads to hatred and suspicion of the "other" (Tagore, 1917/2009c). He points to an "instinct of animals" in the suspicion of alien races (Tagore, 1913/1996d, p. 359) and a feeling of superiority that blinds one to the fact that "truth… naturally manifests itself in different countries in different garbs" (Tagore, 1913/1996d, p. 360). This idea of the plurality of human ways of life leads him to the concept of *maitri*, or harmony—the simultaneous coexistence of various ways of thinking and living with mutual respect and cooperation.

This idea of harmony rather than uniformity guides him toward the vision of a free and multicultural world where no power dictates terms: "Power, whether in the patriotic or in any other form, is no lover of freedom. It talks of unity but forgets that true unity is that of freedom. Uniformity is unity of bondage" (Tagore, 1928/1996b, p. 294). In the Indian context, it takes the form of a non-coercive and free-willed unity among people: "I love India, but my India is an Idea and not a geographical expression. Therefore, I am not a patriot—I shall ever seek my compatriots all over the world" (Tagore, 1928/1996b, p. 294). Guha (2009) remarks that Tagore's critique of nationalism carried special weight because everyone acknowledged his profound love for his country. Tagore's ideas can also help one understand the concept of a multicultural world, where different cultures retain their distinctiveness yet wholeheartedly take part in shared humanity: "Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship is the goal of human history" (Tagore, 1917/2009c, p. 34). The idea of multiculturalism can indeed look to Tagore for his powerful rejection of the homogenizing forces of a nation. Tagore's cosmopolitanism also becomes a forerunner to the idea of rooted cosmopolitanism, as articulated by Kwame Anthony Appiah (Appiah, 2006). As Mukherjee (2020) puts it succinctly, Tagore was deeply connected to Bengali culture and, at the same time, considered himself part of global humanity.

Nonetheless, Tagore did not support cultural exclusiveness, where culture is treated as a static category—inward-looking and narrow in its orthodoxy. He envisaged a world of cultural diversity and mutual exchange that provides freedom of conscience for the individual, with no central homogenizing force dominating this process. Tagore constantly warned against exclusive nationalism and upheld an idea of India based on diversity. Thus, for Tagore, it is not homogeneity but harmony (*maitri*). *Maitri*—meaning harmony and friendship—leads to a worldview very different from that prevalent in the interwar period.

The next section, therefore, examines how Tagore confronts the nascent realist politics of his time.

Nation-States and Realist Politics

Arlene Tickner notes that realism has created a discourse that regards idealist approaches as unpragmatic while positioning conflict and force as inescapable facts of the world. She remarks that the task of critical scholarship is to identify the processes through which this discourse became dominant and to recover the "alternative voices" that have been silenced in this process (Tickner, 2003, p. 300). Tagore's thought can be viewed as one such important alternative voice, presenting a critique of the concepts that later became the core assumptions of mainstream theories in IR. While the Westphalian narrative considered states outside Europe as anarchic, Tagore, in his essays on nationalism, regarded European politics itself as anarchic. Whereas the Westphalian order spotlighted certain norms of interaction between nation-states, Tagore challenged the very idea of the nation-state, finding the roots of anarchy in the rise of rival "nationalisms." He dismisses two influential European political theories: the first, from the English School, posited that Europe had resolved its anarchy problem and sought to bring other countries into this society to remedy their anarchy; the second, from the realist school, regarded anarchy as the determining condition of international interaction. Tagore emphasized the law of cooperation rather than the law of anarchy, finding the sources of anarchy not in some inevitable, timeless laws but in the temporal phenomenon of nation-states.

Tagore's philosophy is a living and dynamic philosophy, reinforcing change and movement toward the attainment of perfection in human life. He rejects so-called realism, which denies this law of change, calling it "the worst form of untruth." He gives a powerful analogy to the fatalism of realism: "It is like preaching that only in the morgue can we comprehend the reality of the human body—the body which has its perfect revelation when seen in life" (Tagore, 1931/1996e, p. 137). Tagore indicates that the realist perspective was status-quoist and denied change as a fact of human life. He avers that, unlike rocks and crystals, which are static, human beings are innately creative and dynamic (Tagore, 1931/1996e). This idea—that the essence of life is motion and change—also rejects the approach of clinging to the past as the guide to the future. Tagore was, in fact, anticipating and critiquing what Morgenthau (1973) would later write in *Politics Among Nations*. Morgenthau begins his six principles with a discussion of certain laws of human nature, which he believed had remained unchanged from ancient times. Tagore emphatically rejects the assumption that events of the past will continue in the future in a deterministic manner, with human beings having no agency to alter them. He observes that nations "perpetuate" a violent world by reiterating that "warfare is eternal" (Tagore, 1931/1996e, p. 188).

Another concept widely debated in contemporary scholarship is Morgenthau's concept of the political man. Whereas in the realm of economics, the economic man dominates, his political counterpart is the political man. As J. Ann Tickner points out, by abstracting the political man from his moral nature, Morgenthau ends up constructing a political beast (Tickner, 1988). Tagore was prescient enough to foresee how Europe was creating this unidimensional economic man. Its political counterpart, the political man, lusts after power and overshadows the moral, complete man (Tagore, 1917/2009c). Thus, he presents an alternative view of human nature, highlighting how cooperative tendencies manifest in society, which he details as "a spontaneous self-expression of man as a social being" (Tagore, 1917/2009c, p. 37).

Tagore's analysis can be used to redefine certain concepts in International Relations. The social dimension of human beings is largely absent in realist theories, and as a result, cooperation is overshadowed by conflict in the realist understanding of world politics. The "lust for power," which forms the main driving force for politics in realist theory, is diagnosed by Tagore not as something inherent in human nature but as a problem of politics based on nations. He critiques the way nations are structured, arguing that they are constantly in need of strengthening themselves against an "other." Consequently, humanity, empathy, and creativity are lost to the urgency created by nations (Tagore, 1917/2009a). In the realist image, the persistent clashes between states are explained either by human beings' selfish nature or by anarchy in the international system. Tagore traces its origin to the very nature of Western nationalism (Tagore, 1917/2009c). From Tagore's perspective, Westphalia had failed to civilize Europe. His ideas thus present a powerful critique of the power tradition in IR, and he cites the example of Sparta, where an excessive focus on the accumulation of power led to implosion, to prove this point (Tagore, 1917/2009c).

Tagore keenly analyzed the politics of nation-states, critiquing phenomena such as the security dilemma, alliance politics, balance-of-power dynamics, and the cultural and economic imperialism accompanying these practices. He examined the politics of the balance of power—arising from the existence of nation-states competing for resources and influence—from the standpoint that such dynamics are inherent in the very existence of separate and exclusive political organizations. He therefore posits that "the Nation is the greatest evil for the Nation" (Tagore, 1917/2009c, p. 52). He questions the very logic of balancing, pointing out that this equilibrium of evil fails to provide any long-term solution to the problem: "Do you believe that evil can be permanently kept in check by competition with evil…" (Tagore, 1917/2009c, p. 61). Literature on norms in IR has studied the emergence and diffusion of norms in the world (see Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Tannenwald, 2005; Klotz, 2025). Tagore's global concerns and activism, expressed through his lectures and friendships, and his focus on what "should be" place him within an epistemic

community that strove to generate norms for a post-colonial world grounded in freedom and cooperation. In Tagore's thinking, the normative is not conceived as a utopian ideal but as a force at work in the world. He criticizes realpolitik for neglecting this normative dimension, observing that the politicians and even the "scientific philosophers," "are busy analyzing the component parts of what is, and think it old fashioned to bring into view a synthetic vision of what should be" (Tagore, 1924/2007a, p. 303). This concern of "what should be," however, is based on a theory of reality in which life is understood in terms of relations and change. Therefore, an emphasis on relationality and dynamism constitutes the core pillars of an alternative worldview.

The Alternatives: *Mukti* and *Maitri* as the Basis of *Swaraj*

The recurrent themes in Tagore's works may be enlisted as freedom, creation, unity, harmony, and cooperation. Taken together, these ideas rest on two key pillars: mukti and maitri. Mukti signifies the emancipatory dimension in Tagore, while maitri represents love, friendship, and harmony. An understanding of these two basic ideas aids in comprehending the alternative that Tagore proposes to nationalism—namely, the idea of swaraj.

Tagore's *Swaraj*

Tagore's idea of swaraj, with its stress on human creativity, envisions a society composed of individuals who have developed "self-mastery" (Tagore, 1921/1997b, p. 82) and live in harmony with one another. He says, "To gain one's own country means to realize one's own soul more fully expanded within it" (Tagore, 1921/1997b, p. 71). This conception of swaraj is different from the political model of nation-states. The cult of nationalism is discouraged, and Tagore rejects blind obedience. He favors a critical attitude toward authority and encourages a strong "spirit of inquiry" (Tagore, 1921/1997b, pp. 80–81). Freedom, for Tagore, is not primarily freedom from colonial domination; rather, it is about regaining self-mastery by people: "Freedom is in complete awakening, in full self-expression" (Tagore, 1921/1997b, p. 81). He envisions a society that is not paralyzed by a centralized state so as to lose its creativity, vitality, and rigor. As Kaviraj observes, Tagore regarded modern sovereignty, which engulfs the entire social life, as the central problem (Kaviraj, 2020). Significantly, Tagore's ideas of mukti (freedom) and maitri (friendship/harmony) visualize a polity that is not structured as an exclusive community designed to compete against others. Instead, he conceives of revitalized societies based on cooperative, rather than competitive, relations at all levels. Such a society is outward-looking and open to cooperation at the global level.

Global Cooperation

One of the persistent themes in the writings and speeches of Tagore is the focus on global cooperation. Tagore noticed the increasing movement of people

and ideas in his time and welcomed it (Tagore, 1924/2007a). In one of his speeches, in which he cautioned Japan against adopting the Western model of international rivalry and competition, Tagore offered the Eastern idea of maitri (friendship) to the world: "'maitri' with men and 'maitri' with Nature" (Tagore, 1917/2009b, p. 18). He foresees universal human bonds and, in place of the law of anarchy, posits the "law of cooperation." This law is based on the idea that we share lives, destiny, and problems that cannot be resolved by anyone alone (Tagore, 1928/1997a, p. 59). However, for Tagore, cooperation does not entail a cessation of all conflicts; rather, it is a process constantly at work in a world marked by both "…antagonism and reconciliation" (Tagore, 1924/2007a, p. 304). Cooperation, thus, lies in creating possibilities for dialogue and communication that aid in removing misunderstandings. Tagore tried to offer solutions for an age in which people were suddenly brought together spatially, but not spiritually, leading to misunderstandings (see Tagore, 1924/2007a). He underscores the importance of transcending these misunderstandings through the creation of solidarities grounded in dialogue and recognition of a shared humanity.

One can draw on Tagore's ideas to make sense of cosmopolitanism from below. Despite its vital role in advocating peace and human rights, cosmopolitanism based on people's activism—often referred to as "cosmopolitanism from below"—has received relatively very little scholarly attention in the discipline (see Rachel Leow's idea of popular internationalism, as discussed by Vivekanandan, 2023). Instead, his idea of cooperation is grounded in individuals from civil society, an approach that can contribute significantly to scholarship on cosmopolitanism that foregrounds people.

Conclusion

Tagore's worldview rests on a fundamentally relational approach, which can be apprehended through the idea of *maitri*. This perspective sees the world as constituted through dynamic relationships—between human beings and nature, as well as among human beings themselves. Such a relational ontology challenges dominant approaches to international relations underpinned by "othering and separation." Crucially, *maitri* in Tagore's thought exists alongside the idea of *mukti* (freedom), which places the free development of the individual at the center of social and political life. From this standpoint, nationalism and territorial boundaries obstruct the fullest realization of an individual's personality and hinder the ability to connect with global humanity. Tagore's approach to international relations is therefore primarily people-centric rather than state-centric. However, as this paper notes, Tagore's ideas were overshadowed in a state-centric Westphalian world by theories that focused on politics among nations rather than people within nations. His efforts to implement his ideas of cooperation, both local and global, were constrained by deeply ingrained asymmetric and hierarchical power structures (Datta, 2015). This paper attempts to explore the potential of Tagore's ideas to contribute to the contemporary

understanding of international politics. It endeavors to demonstrate that his thought offers an alternative framework that can inform theorization in global politics today. A study of Tagore's ontological categories shifts the focus away from viewing the nation-state as the natural mode of existence toward a perspective in which society becomes the central category of analysis. The paper seeks to substantiate that Tagore, more than any other thinker of his time, provides a comprehensive critique of the nation and the politics arising from the existence of nation-states. Finally, Tagore's ideas, rooted in the twin pillars of *maitri* and *mukti*, uniquely illustrate how these fundamental human tendencies can serve as the foundation for an emancipatory society in the future.

References

Anderson, B. (2016). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso. (Original work published 1983)

Appiah, K.A. (2006). *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Bhattacharya, S. (Ed.) (1997). *The Mahatma and the poet: Letters and debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915-1941*. National Book Trust.

Çapan, Z. G. (2017). Enacting the international/ reproducing eurocentrism. *Contexto Internacional,* 39(3), 655-671. http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0102-8529.2017390300010.

Chatterjee, P. (2011). *Lineages of political society: Studies in postcolonial democracy*. Columbia University Press.

Collins, M. (2012). *Empire, nationalism and the postcolonial world: Rabindranath Tagore's writings on history, politics and society*. Routledge.

Datta, P.K. (2015). Co-operation and co-operatives: The global dilemmas of Tagore's rural democracy. *Literature Compass*, 12(5), 184–193.

Datta, P.K. (2023). Tagore's Ideas on universalism, cultural distinction, and the global. Aug 17, 2023. https://www.e-ir.info/2023/08/17/tagores-ideas-on-universalism-cultural-distinction-and-the-global/

Chatterjee, P. (1986). *Nationalist thought and the colonial world: A derivative discourse*. Zed Books.

Devare, A. (2018). Dialogical International Relations: Gandhi, Tagore and self-transformation. In *Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Politics* (pp. 385-399). Routledge.

Finnemore, M., & Sikkink, K. (1998). International norm dynamics and political change. *International organization*, 52(4), 887-917.

Galtung, J. (2005). The missing journalism on conflict and peace and the Middle East. https://www.transcend.org/files/article570.html. Accessed 28 Nov 2018.

Gellner, E. (2006). *Nations and nationalism*. Cornell University Press. (Original work published 1983)

Grovogui, S.N. (2006). Truth and method: Identity, science and political horizons. In *Beyond Eurocentrism and anarchy: Memories of international order and institutions* (pp. 1-24). Palgrave Macmillan.

Guha, R. (2009). Introduction. In R. Tagore, *Nationalism*, vii-lx. Penguin.

Hall, C. & Rose, S. (2006). Introduction: Being at home with the Empire. In C. Hall & S.O. Rose (Eds.), *At home with the empire: Metropolitan culture and the imperial world* (pp. 1-31). Cambridge University Press.

Held, D. (2010). *Cosmopolitanism: Ideals and realities*. Polity.

Jones, B. G. (Ed.). (2006). *Decolonizing International Relations*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Kaviraj, S. (2020). Tagore and the conception of critical nationalism. In *Religion and Nationalism in Asia* (pp. 13-31). Routledge.

Kayaoglu, T. (2010). Westphalian Eurocentrism in international relations theory. *International Studies Review*, 12 (2), 193-217.

Kurki, M. (2020). *International Relations in a relational universe.* Oxford University Press.

Klotz, A. (2025). *Norms in international relations: The struggle against apartheid*. Cornell University Press.

Morgenthau, H. J. (1973). *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace*, 5th ed. Scientific Book Agency.

Mukherjee, M. (2020). Tagore's "rooted-cosmopolitanism" and international mindedness against institutional sustainability. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 40(1), 49-60. https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2020.1725430

Nandy, A. (1983). *The Intimate enemy: Loss and recovery of self under colonialism*. Oxford University Press.

Özkirimli, U. (2010). *Theories of nationalism: A critical introduction*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Qin, Y. (2018). *A relational theory of world politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Sengupta, S. (2009). Continental contemporaries: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 10(2), 320-325. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649370902823470

Shani, G. (2022). From "critical" nationalism to "Asia as method": Tagore's quest for a moral imaginary' and its implications for post-western International Relations. *Global Studies Quarterly*, *2*(4), 1-11.

Tagore, R. (1996a). Construction versus creation. In S. K. Das (Ed.), *English writings of Rabindranath Tagore* (Vol. 3, pp. 401-409). Sahitya Akademi, repr.2012. (Original work published 1928)

Tagore, R. (1996b). Letters to a friend. In S. K. Das (Ed.), *English writings of Rabindranath Tagore* (Vol. 3, pp. 219-322). Sahitya Akademi, repr.2012. (Original work published 1928)

Tagore, R. (1996c). Man. In S. K. Das (Ed.), *English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* (Vol. 3), 193-202. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, repr.2012. (Original work published 1937)

Tagore R. (1996d). Race conflict. In S. K. Das (Ed.), *English writings of Rabindranath Tagore* (Vol. 3, pp. 359-363). Sahitya Akademi, repr.2012. (Original work published 1913)

Tagore, R. (1996e). The religion of man. In S. K. Das (Ed.), *English writings of Rabindranath Tagore* (Vol. 3, 83-189). Sahitya Akademi, repr.2012. (Original work published in 1931)

Tagore, R. (1997a). Tagore's reflections on non-cooperation and cooperation. In S. Bhattacharya (Ed.), *The Mahatma and the poet: Letters and debates between Gandhi and Tagore 1915-1941* (pp. 54-62). National Book Trust. (Original work published in 1928)

Tagore, R. (1997b). The call of truth. In S. Bhattacharya (Ed.), *The Mahatma and the poet: Letters and debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915-1941* (pp. 68-87). National Book Trust. (Original work published in 1921)

Tagore, R. (1997c). The cult of the charkha. In S. Bhattacharya (Ed.), *The Mahatma and the poet: Letters and debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915-1941* (pp. 99-112). National Book Trust. (Original work published in 1925)

Tagore, R. (2007a). International cooperation. In N. Ghosh (Ed.), *English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* (Vol. 4, pp. 299-308). Sahitya Akademi, repr.2016. (Original work published 1924)

Tagore, R. (2007b). The Sudra Habit. In N. Ghosh (Ed.), *English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* (Vol. 4, pp. 319-325). Sahitya Akademi, repr.2016. (Original work published 1927).

Tagore, R. (2007c). World War II. In N. Ghosh (Ed.), *English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* (Vol. 4, p. 771). Sahitya Akademi, repr.2016. (Original work published 1941)

Tagore, R. (2009a). Nationalism in India. In R. Tagore, *Nationalism* (pp. 64-87). Penguin. (Original work published 1917)

Tagore, R. (2009b). Nationalism in Japan. In R. Tagore, *Nationalism* (pp. 1-32). Penguin. (Original work published 1917)

Tagore, R. (2009c). Nationalism in the West. In R. Tagore, *Nationalism* (pp.33-63). Penguin. (Original work published 1917)

Tagore, R. (2014). *Crisis in civilization*. Visva-Bharati. (Original work published 1941)

Tannenwald, N. (2005). Stigmatizing the bomb: Origins of the nuclear taboo. *International Security*, *29*(4), 5–49. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4137496

Tickner, A.B. (2003). Seeing IR differently: Notes from the third world. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies,* 32 (2), 295-324.

Tickner, J.A. (1988). Hans Morgenthau's principles of political realism: A feminist reformulation. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 17(3), 429-440.

Trownsell T, Behera N.C., Shani G. (2022). Introduction to the Special Issue: Pluriversal relationality. *Review of International Studies,* 48(5), 787-800. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210522000389

Vivekanandan, J. (2023). One World or Many? Critical Reflections on Cosmopolitanism and International Relations. *Journal of Polity & Society*, 15(2), 3-14.