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Tagorean Universalism and Cosmopolitanism*

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]

In my book *A Hundred Horizons* I had claimed that Tagore was an eloquent proponent of a universalist aspiration, albeit a universalism

By **Sugata Bose**

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with a difference.[2] 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. 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. Colourless cosmopolitanism is assigned a high moral ground; colourful patriotism is deemed to be seductive, but devoid of any ethical content. 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'. 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

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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. A useful enough corrective to the excesses of colourless 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 colourful cosmopolitanism rather than the legacy of the deadweight of traditions might be a better antidote to the philosophical hubris of the votaries of colourless cosmopolitanism.

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. 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

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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. By observing Taikan, Abanindranath Tagore learned the Japanese wash technique, of which his famous painting *Bharatmata* (*Mother India*, 1905) is a prominent example; the Japanese and Chinese brush-and-ink style was more deeply imbibed by Abanindranath's brother, Gaganendranath Tagore. In Nandalal Bose's early masterpiece *Sati* (1907), a quintessentially Indian theme of selfless womanhood emerged in the colours and contours of the Japanese wash.

While the First World War raged in Europe and the Middle East, Rabindranath Tagore set off on a global oceanic voyage from Calcutta on 3 May 1916, aboard the Japanese ship *Tosamaru*. Travelling 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

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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 signalled 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 ...'

From Burma the *Tosamaru* travelled further east towards Penang, Singapore and Hongkong. The poet felt a sense of joy observing the strength and skill of Chinese labourers 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 21 May 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.

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On 29 May 1916, the *Tosamaru* reached the Japanese port of Kobe. Tagore's three-month sojourn in Japan represented the fulfilment 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 7 September 1916. While he was in Japan Tagore had received an invitation to visit Vancouver. He flatly rejected it. Well aware of the *Komagatamaru* incident, Tagore refused to travel to Canada and Australia until these dominions withdrew their discriminatory immigration policies. Among the white dominions of the British Empire, Australia had instituted an unambiguous 'whites only' immigration policy. Canada chose a more hypocritical path. A 'continuous voyage' clause in the immigration law barred all those who did not arrive on an unbroken journey from their country of origin. A little gentle pressure on the shipping lines was all that was required to suspend operations on the Calcutta-Vancouver route.

Ironically, the ship that took Tagore across the Pacific was named *Canadamaru*. Tagore disembarked in Seattle. He then travelled 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. Yet Tagore's anti-Nation stance was a cause of some concern to anti-colonial nationalists at home. Although Tagore's book *Nationalism* was not published until later in 1917, reports of his speeches in the United States had appeared in the Calcutta journal *Modern Review*. In April 1917, the nationalist leader Chitta Ranjan Das questioned and challenged the recently published opinion of the poet who had been 'the high-priest of the nation-idea at the inception of the Swadeshi Movement'. The 'whole of this anti-nation idea' appeared to C.R. Das to be 'insubstantial – based upon a vague and nebulous conception of universal

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humanity'. He refused to accept that the idea of nationalism was 'a foreign importation'. The 'spirit of nationalism', he contended, was founded upon a 'permanent and immutable relation, which subsists between a particular people and the land which they inhabit'. Bengali nationalism was, therefore, moulded by the soil and atmosphere of Bengal. Das conceded that the First World War was 'the consequence of nationalism pushed to its excess'; yet 'the larger union among the peoples of Europe' in the future would also be founded on the principle of nationalism. 'And if at some dim and distant day, the Federation of Humanity is established in this world,' he continued, 'that will be because the different nations of this earth will each have reached the full development of its distinctive peculiarities.' 'Distinctiveness', he asserted, 'can never be abolished'. However, he could see union bringing out in sharp relief 'the deeper harmony which underlies all outer differences between different nationalities'. That was the ground on which 'the universal brotherhood of man' could be forged and that the East and the West could be said to 'have met and not in vain'.

If Swadeshi nationalism had forged connections with Asian universalism, the non-cooperation and Khilafat movement led by Mahatma Gandhi in the aftermath of World War I was inextricably linked with the evocation of an Islamic universalism. 'Let Hindus not be frightened by Pan-Islamism,' Gandhi had written in *Young India*. 'It is not – it need not be – anti-Indian or anti-Hindu.' In exhorting Hindus to extend support to Muslims on the Khilafat question, Gandhi saw no contradiction between a territorial conception of nationalism and an extra-territorial anti-colonial sentiment. The movement that united Hindus and Muslims was led in Bengal by none other than C.R. Das who tried to preserve this spirit of unity even after Gandhi called off non-cooperation through the Bengal Pact between the province's two religious communities. In his very last public speech in 1925, Das returned once more to the theme of nationalism and universalism. 'Nationalism,' he explained, 'is merely a process in self-realization, self-development and self-fulfilment. It is not an end in itself. The growth and development of nationalism is necessary so that humanity may realize itself, develop itself and fulfil itself; and I beseech you, when you discuss the terms of settlement, do not forget the larger claim of humanity in your pride of nationalism.'

: Sugata Bose

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With the waning of the Khilafat movement and the abolition of the institution by Kemal Ataturk in 1924, Indian nationalists turned again towards the dream of an Asian universalism. In 1924, Tagore travelled 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, 8 May 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 travelled east from Madras on the French ship *Amboise*. 'India's learning had once spread outside India,' Tagore wrote to Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis on 15 July 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.'[3] 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'. Tagore's visit to the Malay peninsula in 1927 gave him a chance to have a conversation with the Chinese literati. Lim Boon Keng 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

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Mi-Lo river in Hunan. Once Lim sent him a copy of his manuscript, Tagore wrote a foreword for the book in Penang.

On 16 August 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. 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 full exploration of Java had to wait until a pilgrimage had been made to Bali. 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 dhori 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'.)

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From Bali Tagore travelled to Surabaya on the predominantly Muslim island of Java. 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. 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.'

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, 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.*
> (Who goes playing that plaintive flute on a foreign boat
> I can feel the touch of that melody.)

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.

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Tagore pursued the Buddhist connection 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 11 October 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.*
> (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

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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]'.

While still respectful of the traditions of Indian art, the painter Nandalal's work in the late 1920s and early 1930s reveals how far he had travelled from the predilections of the Swadeshi decade (1905–15). His artistic evolution is best exemplified in his experiments with the Madonna motif; these images were a radical break from the Bengal school's early forms of venerating country and goddess as mother. At an exhibition in 1926–27, he displayed a small tempera panel featuring a human mother and child flanked on either side by three animal mothers with their cubs. The artistic equivalence of motherly love in the human and animal worlds was recognized by one important critic as a key innovation in the depiction of mother figures. Five years later Nandalal brilliantly portrayed a Bengali Madonna in his painting *Caitanya-Janani* (or *Birth of Caitanya*), celebrating the birth of the great fifteenth-century Indian exponent of *bhakti*, or personal devotion to God. A certain resemblance was discernible between the facial contours of the Bengali Madonna and the mother in the 1926–27 tempera panel.

Even if Nandalal had moved artistically beyond the Swadeshi ideals of worshipping Bharatmata, patriotic sentiment still moved him. The civil disobedience movement stirred him sufficiently to create *Dandi March (Bapuji)*, a 1930 linocut depicting Mahatma Gandhi on his salt march. However, his greatest contribution to the popular culture of mass nationalism was the several hundred Haripura posters. As many as 86 were by his own hand, and they embellished the public and private spaces of the annual session of the Indian National Congress at Haripura, Gujarat, in February 1938. 'Following the *pat[a]* style,' he later wrote, 'we did a large number of paintings and hung them everywhere – on the main entrance, inside the volunteers' camps, even in the rooms meant for Bapuji [Mahatma Gandhi] and Subhasbabu [Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose], the President.' Subhas Bose later visited Santiniketan in January 1939, where he met Rabindranath as well as Nandalal and his art students.

In a poem-painting signed 'Baghdad 24 May 1932' Tagore had still expressed optimism about the ability of the light of the East to show the world a way forward:

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Abasan Holo Rati
Nibaiya Phelo Kalima-Molin
Gharer Koner Bati.
Nikhiler Alo Purba Akashe
Jwalilo Punyadine
Ek Pathe 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.]

Developments in East Asia during the late 1930s brought a measure of disillusionment with the idea of Asia. Japan's invasion of China in 1937 had shown Asia to be as prone to nationalist wars as Europe. In its October 1937 issue the *Modern Review* carried a long essay by Subhas Chandra Bose titled 'Japan's Role in the Far East'. In some ways it offered a remarkably dispassionate, realist analysis of power relations in East Asia. Towards the end of the article, however, Bose did not hesitate to reveal where his sympathies lay. Japan, he conceded had 'done great things for herself and for Asia'. He recalled how Japan had been a beacon of inspiration for all of Asia at the dawn of the twentieth century. He welcomed Japan's stance against the Western imperial powers. But, he asked, could not Japan's aims be achieved 'without Imperialism, without dismembering the Chinese Republic, without humiliating another proud, cultured and ancient race?' 'No,' he replied, 'with all our admiration for Japan, where such admiration is due, our whole heart goes out to China in her hour of trial.' He then went on to draw some ethical lessons for India from the conflict in East Asia. 'Standing at the threshold of a new era,' he wrote, 'let India resolve to aspire after national self-fulfilment in every direction – but not

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at the expense of other nations and not through the bloody path of self-aggrandisement and imperialism.'

The 1940s were a turbulent decade for Bengal, India, and indeed, the whole of Asia. Rabindranath Tagore passed away in August 1941, having lamented in the last year of his life the tendency of human civilization to kill itself with its own dagger. Nandalal Bose did not paint the horrors of war, famine and partition – that was left to his younger contemporaries, Somenath Hore and Jainul Abedin. There is, however, a deep sense of irony in his painting *Annapurna,* which was created in 1943, the year of the great Bengal famine in which three million people died. More than three decades earlier, Nandalal had painted a serene picture titled *Annapurna and Shiva*. Now, in a combination of tempera and wash, he created the haunting *Annapurna and Rudra* (later simply titled *Annapurna*). Annapurna, who is seated on a lotus, holds a bowl of rice in her hands. Before her stands Shiva, reduced to a skeleton holding a begging bowl.

Subhas Chandra Bose was by now in Southeast Asia organizing the Indian National Army. Indians in Singapore and Malaya responded with great enthusiasm to his patriotic call. In late August and early September 1943 he tried to send rice from Burma to Bengal, which was being decimated by a terrible man-made famine. His offers to provide relief were nervously suppressed by the British in India. On 21 November 1943, he broadcast an appeal to Chungking from Shanghai. 'The Indian people,' he said, 'really sympathize with China and the Chinese people.' He reminded the Chungking government that as President of the Indian National Congress he had sent out the first medical mission to China as a token of sympathy for the Chinese people. He urged Chungking not to send troops to India 'to fight against us on the side of the British'. He tried to suggest that 1943 was not 1937 and that East Asia faced 'an entirely new situation'. He looked forward to the day 'not far off' when by means of 'an honourable peace' Japan would 'withdraw her troops' from China. An unrealistic hope, given the recent history of Japanese atrocities in China, this wishful thinking about a rapprochement between China and Japan was evidence of a lingering faith in an Asian universalism being torn asunder by nationalist rivalries.[4]

In the end, Japanese art enabled the spirit of an Asian universalism to survive the depredations of Japanese nationalistic imperialism. After Indian independence was achieved in 1947, Nandalal Bose

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began to quietly and confidently celebrate the Indian countryside in his art creatively drawing on the Japanese *sumie* style. Rabindranath's literary imagination and Nandalal's artistic imagination aspired to what historians and cultural critics have variously called a different universalism or a vernacular cosmopolitanism.

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'. 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.

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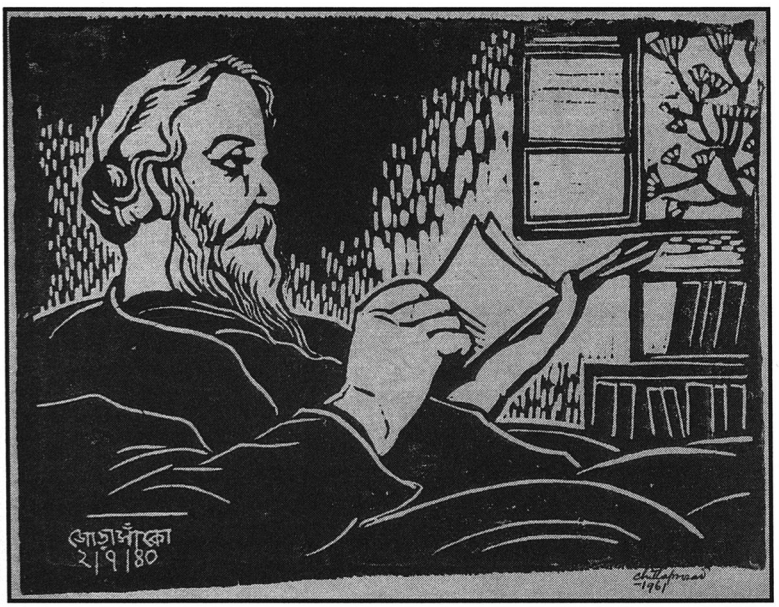
ENDNOTES:

1. Rabindranath Tagore, *Parashye* (*In Persia*) in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 22 (Calcutta: Viswabharati, 1957), pp. 480-488, 511-520.
2. Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: the Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 267-270.
3. Rabindranath Tagore to Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis, 1st Sraban, Bengali 1334, 15 July 1927, in Rabindranath Tagore, *Java Jatrir Patra* (Letters of a Traveller to Java) in 'Rabindra Rachanabali' Vol. 19 (Calcutta, 1957).
4. Sisir K. Bose and Sugata Bose (eds.), *Chalo Delhi: Writing and Speeches 1943-1945, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Collected Works Volume 12* (Calcutta: Netaji Research Bureau and Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007), pp. 79, 161-162 and Sugata Bose, *His Majesty's Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India's Struggle against Empire* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press and Delhi: Allen Lane, Penguin, 2011), pp. 250, 262-263.

* Adapted from the Lecture 'Universalism and Cosmopolitanism: Tagore's Oceanic Voyages', delivered at the IIC, New Delhi, on 22 March 2011.

: Sugata Bose

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Rabindranath Tagore

Linocut on paper pasted on mountboard, 1961

8.5 × 11.5 in. / 21.6 × 29.2 cm

Signed and dated in English (lower right) 'Chittaprosad 1961'

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