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Living the Infinite: Rethinking Nationhood through Tagore's Philosophy

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore's reflections on nationhood make a significant contribution to Indian philosophical thought, yet his philosophical and literary writings are often examined as separate intellectual domains. Such an approach obscures the continuity of the ethical and philosophical principles that shape his understanding of the individual, society, and the nation. This paper examines how Tagore's philosophy of life informs his conception of nationhood through an integrated reading of Sadhana: The Realisation of Life, Nationalism, Gora, and "Kabuliwala". By situating these works within the broader framework of Indian philosophy, the paper investigates the relationship between self-realisation, ethical responsibility, universal humanism, and national consciousness.

This article adopts a qualitative research design employing close reading, philosophical interpretation, and comparative textual analysis. The philosophical arguments articulated in Sadhana: The Realisation of Life and Nationalism are examined alongside their literary expression in Gora and "Kabuliwala" to identify the continuity of Tagore's ethical vision across philosophical and creative writings. The analysis draws on Indian philosophical concepts, particularly the unity of existence, the interconnectedness of life, and the individual's moral responsibility to society. The analysis reveals that Tagore reimagines nationhood not as a political or territorial construct but as an ethical community sustained by compassion, freedom, and respect for human dignity. Bengal's cultural landscape was largely shaped by dominant Brahmanical narratives, leaving limited space for the voices and experiences of marginalised communities such as Dalits, Tribals, and Muslims. The transformation of identity in Gora, the universal humanism embodied in "Kabuliwala", and

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the philosophical critique of political nationalism in Nationalism collectively reflect the ideals articulated in Sadhana: The Realisation of Life. Read together, these writings present a coherent philosophical vision in which national identity is inseparable from ethical consciousness and universal fellowship. By bringing Tagore's philosophical and literary writings into dialogue, the paper offers an integrated interpretation of his idea of nationhood and demonstrates its continuing relevance to contemporary discussions on ethical citizenship, cultural pluralism, value-based education, and Indian philosophical thought.

Keywords: Tagore's philosophy; nationhood; philosophy of life; ethical humanism; self-realisation; universal humanism.

Introduction:

Rabindranath Tagore has a significant place in Indian intellectual history as a philosopher, poet, novelist, and social thinker whose ideologies on humanity, spirituality, and society continue to shape contemporary debates on ethics and nationhood.

> Tagore's letters present a vision that inspires resilience and the cultivation of positive human potential. Throughout his life, Tagore remained deeply self-aware, and his writings reflect a strong ethical and philosophical consciousness. It encourages a responsible mode of living in harmony with the natural world. (Gulshan 15)

While his philosophical writings and literary works have often been studied independently, they share a coherent vision rooted in the Indian philosophical tradition, particularly the Upanishadic ideals of the unity of existence, self-realisation, and universal fellowship.

Tagore's understanding of nationhood emerges not from political ideology or territorial nationalism but from an ethical philosophy that affirms the dignity of the individual and the interconnectedness of all life. His critique of aggressive nationalism, articulated in *Nationalism*, is inseparable from the spiritual insights presented in *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life* and finds powerful literary expression in *Gora* and the short story "Kabuliwala." Together, these texts reveal that genuine national consciousness is founded upon compassion, freedom, moral responsibility, and respect for cultural plurality rather than exclusion or political domination.

Literature Review:

Rabindranath Tagore's philosophical and literary writings have attracted sustained scholarly attention across disciplines such as literature, philosophy, history, and cultural studies. Scholars have examined his contributions to universal humanism, education, spirituality, and nationhood, offering valuable perspectives that inform the present study. In *The Argumentative Indian*, Amartya Sen situates Tagore within the broader Indian intellectual tradition and presents him as a thinker whose philosophy of freedom, reason, and universal humanism transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. Sen argues that Tagore's ideas on education,

intercultural dialogue, and human dignity continue to offer meaningful insights for contemporary society (Sen 89). Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, in *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*, provide a comprehensive account of Tagore's life and intellectual development. Their study demonstrates that Tagore's poetry, fiction, essays, and educational philosophy are interconnected expressions of a unified worldview rooted in ethical responsibility and spiritual humanism (Dutta and Robinson 151).

In *Indian Writing in English*, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar recognises Tagore as a pioneering figure of modern Indian literature. Iyengar observes that Tagore successfully harmonises Indian philosophical traditions with literary creativity, making his writings a significant bridge between Eastern spiritual thought and universal human values (Iyengar 99). Mohammad A. Quayum, in *Tagore, Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism: Perceptions, Contestations and Contemporary Relevance*, re-examines Tagore's philosophy from a contemporary perspective. Quayum argues that Tagore's ethical humanism and cosmopolitan vision provide an alternative framework for understanding nationhood through compassion, cultural dialogue, and shared humanity rather than narrow boundaries (Quayum 65).

Similarly, Michael Collins, in *Empire, Nationalism and the Postcolonial World: Rabindranath Tagore's Writings on History, Politics and Society*, studies Tagore's reflections on civilisation, society, and moral responsibility. Collins shows that Tagore's philosophical writings consistently emphasise the primacy of ethical values and the welfare of humanity, a vision reflected throughout his literary works (Collins 70). Radha Chakravarty, in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Critical Companion*, explores the philosophical continuity across Tagore's poetry, fiction, essays, and educational thought. She argues that his writings are unified by a commitment to self-realisation, universal humanism, and cultural harmony, making his philosophy relevant to both literary studies and contemporary ethical discourse (Chakravarty 115).

While these scholars have made significant contributions to the study of Tagore's philosophy and literature, their discussions generally focus on individual texts or specific aspects of his intellectual thought. This study builds on these contributions by offering an integrated reading of *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life*, *Nationalism*, *Gora*, and "Kabuliwala". It argues that these philosophical and literary writings collectively articulate a coherent vision of nationhood grounded in self-realisation, ethical consciousness, and universal human fellowship.

Aim and Objectives:

By examining Tagore's philosophical essays and his literary writings, this article argues that his conception of nationhood is fundamentally an ethical and spiritual project that seeks to reconcile individual identity with universal human values. Through qualitative analysis based on close reading and philosophical interpretation, the study shows how Tagore reimagines the nation as a living moral community grounded in self-realisation, human solidarity, and the ideal of the

Infinite, offering a timeless framework for understanding ethical citizenship and harmonious coexistence in an increasingly divided world. The present study has three objectives. First, it examines Rabindranath Tagore's concept of nationhood through an integrated reading of *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life*, *Nationalism*, *Gora*, and "Kabuliwala". Second, it analyses how the philosophical principles of self-realisation, ethical consciousness, and universal humanism are articulated across Tagore's philosophical and literary writings. Finally, it demonstrates the continuing relevance of Tagore's integrated philosophical vision in promoting ethical citizenship, cultural harmony, and universal human values in the contemporary world.

Discussion

Sadhana: The Realisation of Life provides the philosophical foundation for Tagore's understanding of nationhood. Drawing upon the Upanishadic conception of the unity of existence, Tagore argues that the individual, nature, and the Infinite are inseparably connected. Self-realisation is not merely an inward spiritual journey but the recognition of one's essential unity with all forms of life. Such realisation transforms the individual into an ethical being whose actions are guided by compassion, harmony, and responsibility. For Tagore, true freedom comes not through material advancement or individualism but through cultivating moral and spiritual consciousness. These philosophical principles form the foundation for his broader reflections on society and nationhood. Thus, *Sadhana* argues that a meaningful nation must begin with ethical living and universal fellowship, not external structures alone. Tagore's conception of self-realisation extends beyond individual spiritual awakening to encompass ethical responsibility within the family, society, and the nation. In *Sadhana*, he explains:

> The Infinite in India was not a thin nonentity, void of all content. The Rishis of India asserted emphatically, "To know him in this life is to be true; not to know him in this life is the desolation of death." How to know him then? "By realising him in each and all." Not only in nature but in the family, in society, and in the state, the more we realise the World-consciousness in all, the better for us. Failing to realise it, we turn our faces to destruction. (*Sadhana* 20).

In *Nationalism*, Tagore extends the philosophical principles articulated in *Sadhana* to reflect upon the idea of the nation. Rather than defining nationhood solely through political or territorial boundaries, he envisions it as an ethical community sustained by compassion, freedom, and human dignity. He distinguishes between a living society rooted in shared moral values and a mechanistic conception of the nation driven by organisation and power. According to Tagore, when people neglect ethical responsibility, collective life loses its human character. His reflections, therefore, advocate a model of nationhood grounded in mutual respect, cultural harmony, and humanity's welfare. Read alongside *Sadhana*, *Nationalism* demonstrates that social progress must emerge from ethical consciousness and spiritual responsibility. The ethical ideal of self-realisation is

closely associated with harmony in *Sadhana*. Tagore writes, "This is why the Upanishads describe those who have attained the goal of human life as 'peaceful' and as 'at-one-with-God,' meaning that they are in perfect harmony with man and nature, and therefore in undisturbed union with God" (*Sadhana* 15). This passage demonstrates that, for Tagore, spiritual fulfilment is inseparable from ethical living and harmonious relationships. The individual who realises the Infinite transcends selfish interests and recognises the interconnectedness of humanity, nature, and the Divine. This philosophical principle becomes the foundation of Tagore's vision of ethical nationhood throughout his philosophical and literary writings. Tagore's philosophy of self-realisation is founded on the belief that the human soul transcends individual ego and participates in a larger universal reality.

Rabindranath Tagore's political philosophy presents a powerful critique of uncritical Western nationalism and colourless cosmopolitanism. He denounced the aggressive and expansionist nationalism of the West, which in his view placed the supremacy of the state above moral and spiritual values, ultimately resulting in global conflicts such as the World Wars. Tagore believed that India's spiritual heritage, grounded in the Upanishadic ideals, made its soil unsuited for such divisive nationalist sentiments; instead, he advocated for an inclusive, ethically grounded nationalism (Kumar 420).

In *Sadhana*, he writes, "When we are conscious of our soul, we perceive the inner being that transcends our ego and has its deeper affinity with the All" (*Sadhana* 27). This statement suggests that true self-realisation comes from moving beyond self-centred identity toward an awareness of the interconnectedness of all existence. The phrase "deeper affinity with the All" reflects the Upanishadic principle that every individual shares a common spiritual essence with humanity and the universe. For Tagore, such consciousness becomes the foundation of ethical living, as it nurtures compassion, mutual respect, and responsibility toward others. Consequently, nationhood is not defined by political power or territorial boundaries but by the moral and spiritual bonds that unite individuals within a larger human community.

Tagore's philosophical vision finds its literary embodiment in *Gora*. The novel traces the protagonist's journey from a limited understanding of identity toward a broader recognition of universal humanity. *Gora*'s discovery of his birth compels him to reassess his beliefs and ultimately embrace a more inclusive conception of belonging. This transformation reflects the philosophical principle of self-realisation articulated in *Sadhana*, where true knowledge dissolves artificial divisions and affirms human unity. Through *Gora*'s personal growth, Tagore shows that authentic nationhood rests not on inherited identities but on ethical awareness, compassion, and respect for the dignity of all people. In *Gora*, Tagore cautions against uncritical imitation of foreign models, arguing that genuine strength must emerge from self-awareness and cultural confidence. He writes, "If we have the mistaken notion that because the English are strong, we can never become strong unless we become exactly like them, then that impossibility will never be achieved, for by mere

imitation we shall eventually be neither one thing nor the other" (*Gora* 102). It reflects Tagore's belief that authentic progress cannot be achieved through imitation alone. Instead, individuals and societies must cultivate their own ethical and cultural identity while remaining open to universal human values. Through *Gora*'s reflections, Tagore emphasises that true nationhood is rooted in self-realisation rather than replicating external models. Contemporary scholars have also recognised Gora's philosophical evolution. Discussing the novel's treatment of the individual and society, Mousumi Das observes, "Again, through the characters conceived by him in *Gora*, Tagore first tried to show that individuals are like mechanical units purposed for the greater welfare of the society. But through different changes, Tagore finally came to the idealistic concept of individuals in society" (Das 405). Das's observation highlights Tagore's gradual shift from a utilitarian view of social existence to an ethical vision centred on individual self-realisation and universal human values. This transformation is most evident in *Gora*'s own journey, where rigid notions of identity ultimately give way to compassion, inclusiveness, and a broader sense of belonging. Thus, *Gora* demonstrates that the individual is not merely a constituent of society but a moral agent whose ethical awakening contributes to the well-being of the larger community.

The short story "Kabuliwala" illustrates Tagore's philosophy through the simplicity of everyday human relationships. The emotional bond between Kabuliwala and Mini transcends differences of language, culture, and geographical origin, revealing the universality of parental love and compassion. By portraying shared human emotions as stronger than external distinctions, Tagore demonstrates that genuine relationships are founded upon empathy and mutual understanding. The story thus complements the philosophical insights of *Sadhana*, the ethical reflections of *Nationalism*, and the transformative journey depicted in *Gora*. Together, these texts affirm that universal humanism constitutes the moral basis of nationhood and harmonious coexistence. Tagore's philosophy of universal humanism finds one of its most moving literary expressions in "Kabuliwala." "Rabindranath Tagore, a Nobel laureate renowned for his profound contributions to literature, penned the short story Kabuliwala, a narrative that has resonated with readers across generations and cultures" (Nishaat and Parvez 154).

The narrator's perception of Kabuliwala undergoes a profound transformation when he recognises their shared experience of fatherhood. He reflects:

> My eyes filled with tears at the sight of that piece of paper. It no longer mattered to me that he was an ordinary fruit-peddler from Kabul and I belonged to an aristocratic Bengali family. In a moment, I realised we were both the same, he was a father, and so was I. The print of his mountain-dwelling daughter's hand reminded me of my own Mini. ("Kabuliwala" 5)

This moment transcends distinctions of nationality, class, and culture, revealing the universality of human emotions. The child's handprint becomes a powerful symbol of parental love that dissolves social and geographical boundaries. Through this

encounter, Tagore affirms that genuine human relationships are founded on empathy and shared emotional experience rather than external identities. Consequently, "Kabuliwala" reinforces the philosophical ideals articulated in *Sadhana* and *Nationalism*, demonstrating that ethical nationhood is sustained by compassion, mutual understanding, and universal fellowship.

Tagore's integrated philosophical vision continues to offer significant insights into contemporary society by emphasising ethical citizenship, cultural harmony, and universal human values. The philosophical principles articulated in *Sadhana*, the ethical reflections presented in *Nationalism*, the transformative journey of self-realisation in *Gora*, and the universal compassion portrayed in "Kabuliwala" collectively affirm that enduring social progress depends upon moral consciousness rather than material advancement alone. In an increasingly interconnected yet fragmented world, Tagore's insistence on compassion, mutual respect, and the recognition of shared humanity provides a meaningful framework for addressing cultural diversity and social coexistence. His vision encourages individuals to transcend prejudice, cultivate ethical responsibility, and value human dignity beyond differences of religion, language, nationality, or social status. Such ideals remain particularly relevant in promoting value-based education, intercultural understanding, responsible citizenship, and peaceful coexistence. Therefore, Tagore's philosophical and literary writings continue to inspire a vision of nationhood that is rooted not merely in political structures but in the cultivation of ethical consciousness and universal fellowship.

Conclusion

The study finds that Rabindranath Tagore presents a coherent and integrated philosophy of nationhood across *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life*, *Nationalism*, *Gora*, and "Kabuliwala". While *Sadhana* establishes the philosophical ideals of self-realisation and the unity of existence, *Nationalism* extends these ideals to society's ethical life. *Gora* illustrates the transformative journey from rigid identity to universal humanism, and "Kabuliwala" affirms the universality of human emotions beyond cultural and geographical boundaries. Collectively, these texts demonstrate that Tagore conceives nationhood as an ethical community grounded in compassion, moral responsibility, freedom, and universal fellowship rather than political or territorial considerations.

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