

Rabindranath's *Gora* and the Intractable Problem of Indian Patriotism

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For various reasons, in modern India, patriotism has found it very hard to establish a convincing locus for itself. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Indian patriotism was projected as Hindu nationalism. Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora*, published in 1909 in the immediate aftermath of the anti-partition Swadeshi movement of 1903–08, overcomes the ethnocentricities that led to such a distortion, but, in it, the particular comes too close to the universal – patriotism dissolves into love for all the helpless peoples of the world, offering a radically new way of being an Indian patriot.

This essay is organised as follows: first, I argue that, for various historical reasons, it has been exceptionally hard for modern Indian patriotism to find a sure footing for itself. I then discuss some of the ways in which these difficulties were sought to be resolved in the late 19th and early 20th centuries: by variants of Hindu nationalist resolutions which equated Indian patriotism with Hindu nationalism, calling the country a land of Hindus alone. In the final section, I discuss a distinctive Indian patriotic imaginary that Rabindranath Tagore elaborated in *Gora*, a novel published in 1909.¹ It was written in the immediate aftermath of the first major popular upsurge in Bengal against colonial governance: the anti-partition Swadeshi movement of 1903–08. I conclude with some observations on the significance of the effort as well as on the fragility of its resolution.

The novel was written a 100 years ago. Many of the critical questions that it had asked at that time remain unresolved and contentious matters even today; caste, faith, freedom of country and of individual self-determination, socially forbidden love and patriotic love. It reproduces and then thoroughly problematises certain arguments of Hindu nationalism: first elaborated by late 19th century revivalists and then, in a different way, powerfully developed in Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya's novel *Anandamath*, written three decades before *Gora*.² In a contrapuntal mode, *Gora* then offers a radically new way of being an Indian patriot. Although Indian patriotism had already become a pervasive word, especially during the Swadeshi movement, it had not always conceptually separated itself out from Hindu nationalism: in fact, the movement had remained mortgaged to the symbols and rituals that belonged to Hindu nationalism. *Gora*, therefore, fashioned a significantly new political imaginary.

Some of the late 19th century Hindu revivalist-nationalists located Indian patriotism in a commitment to Hindu social institutions in the present which had supposedly descended unchanged from an ancient past: in family, conjugality, caste and widowhood discipline. They contended that colonisation made these institutions and traditions both threatened and precious, objects that require the loyalty of all patriotic Hindus.³ *Anandamath* took a different route. It dissolved the land and people of India into the image of a freshly coined Goddess of the Motherland. The reified divinity claims the primary loyalty of all Hindus of the land. She also commands them to turn their love for her into an act of violence against Muslims of India.⁴ *Gora* rejects both versions. It rejects the identification of the country with Hindu disciplinary institutions and it refuses to transvalue the land as a goddess. With these two moves, it breaks open the lock between Hindu

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nationalism and Indian patriotism and it clears a space that belongs to patriotism alone. In a later set of English essays published in 1917 and entitled *Nationalism*, Rabindranath would develop a passionate critique of the ideology of nationalism itself, not only of the Hindu variant.⁵ To him, nationalism was invariably a project of power and self-aggrandisement, of exclusion and incipient imperialism: whereas patriotism or the love of the country is a project of care and nurture, of love for people, land, and for the earth itself.

I return to *Gora* in its centenary year with a sense of profound identification but not in a commemorative spirit. I am struck by the relevance of its concerns a 100 years later, and by the intensity and honesty of Rabindranath's engagement with questions and problems that were particularly difficult to address in times of political subjection. What moves me most in the novel, however, is its eventual failure to secure a reliable and convincing foundation for patriotism. In its own way, it is a heroic failure.

I should add here that even though Hindu nationalism and Indian patriotism are unquestionably the dominant themes and concerns of *Gora*, the novel exceeds a narrow political definition and horizon most triumphantly. It talks, most of all, of love of various kinds: between friends, sisters, mother and son, father and daughter, of sexual and romantic love between man and woman. Love is, indeed, a keyword for the novel, it is the unifying principle that brings social, emotional and patriotic problems together on the same plane. It is a positivity that is set against the hatred of the Other that marks Hindu nationalism. Love, moreover, has to be willed in freedom, it cannot be mandated or enforced. The domain of love, most remarkably, is not restricted to the country alone. Unless patriotism also accepts the freedom to love in all kinds of relationship – so the novel argues – patriotism is not enough. There must be freedom, for both country and people, from the disciplines of caste, community divisions, domestic authorities. The vision is a rather uncharacteristic one for Indian patriotism which usually reserves the sphere of freedom and love for country alone, while – with a few exceptions – subjecting individual conduct to several disciplinary controls.

Gora thus connects various kinds of freedom and love. The space of a novel can often evoke the intricately interwoven areas of human concerns, whereas political treatises treat them as disjunct and incommensurable. Precisely because literature smudges the boundaries between different orders of experience that it can both capture and refashion a historical structure of sensibilities so successfully. In my essay, unfortunately, I will focus on the theme of patriotism alone.

1

Let me enumerate and explore some of the impediments to Indian patriotism. Patriotism requires, obviously, a single country as its first condition. It denotes love for a specific territory which, to patriots, is more meaningful and valued than all other lands in the world. Why that land is valued and what the land represents are, however, contentious questions. To secular Indian patriots, land as birthplace, is the source of the self. In Hindu nationalism, a la Savarkar, land is birthplace not only of the people and of their ancestors but of faith: hence Indian Muslims and Christians

do not qualify as full-fledged Indians since their faiths were born outside the land.⁶

That spatial integrity has to be underpinned by a stable map, fairly continuous across a long time span. Patriots and nationalists insist that the modern map in the present had been roughly the same even in the remote antiquities. The effort thus leans upon both time and space, geography and history: the country, as we know it now, must always already have been there. The temporal-spatial identity has to be culturally reinforced as well. And that demands identifying strong threads of unity and sameness, running through the entire land mass, and imparting a common aspect to the people who inhabit it. Claims to unity have an ideological function: it makes the country appear as a natural organism, a self-evident single entity. Very quickly, then, patriotism slides into something more than a politics of place: a certain definition of the culture of the land becomes its defining essence.

Problems with Necessary Ingredients of Patriotism

Unfortunately, for modern Indians, all three necessary ingredients – geographical integrity, historical continuity and cultural unity – ran into problems. When they first began to discourse urgently about patriotism, they had the map of British India before them, a map which spanned an entire subcontinent. It is very unlikely that the subcontinental geography had a real presence or a vivid and shared meaning in the affective world of Indians in pre-modern days. There never really had been a history of comprehensive politico-administrative unification till well into the colonial era. And here, a contrast can be made with China whose physical immensity and variations were counterpointed by an old history of imperial-bureaucratic and linguistic unity. There have been, instead, empires *inside* India, several at a time. Indian dynasties fought against each other, conquered and ruled one another. At no point of time, before British conquests, had the modern map of India been enclosed within a single boundary.

Shared cultural traits could have overlaid politico-administrative divisions. But there were far too few of them. Apart from the classical language of Sanskrit, followed by Persian in later times, there was no single language that people from different parts of the country would understand or use. Sanskrit and Persian, too, were elite languages, used for high literary, sacred or bureaucratic needs, by select groups of people. Live linguistic traditions, on the other hand, were plural and mostly mutually incomprehensible. So were lived cultural traditions and styles of worship which were just as radically different from one another: not only among different religious communities, but also often sharply different for different constituents of the same community. Of course, there had been, in the past, points of continuous contact: a pilgrimage circuit existed from ancient times, connecting many different parts of the country. But pilgrimages would be specific to a particular community or sect, they would not provide a common point of reference for all people inhabiting the land mass. There had also been a widespread circulation of commodities and traders. But such movements of goods and people were restricted to specific groups. Most people would

have neither a familiarity nor a strong emotional bond with different parts of the country. The subcontinent would not appear to them as a beloved country of their own, all parts of which belonged to them in an intimate relationship.

In pre-modern times, popular political loyalty was expected to be directed towards the sovereign and his realm, not towards a land and a people. The word *Ramrajya* would be a good example. The emotions of familiarity and loving intimacy that we associate as the typical features of patriotism were actually reserved for smaller and intimate places. The *Ramayana* had declared that the mother and the birthplace are superior to heaven. The birthplace, in this case, would literally be that – the ancestral homestead where the person was born. The associations of personal history, property and space were the elements which gave a piece of land its peculiar affective claim. The same resonances of felt closeness were conveyed by the word *desh*, a word of Sanskrit origin, common to many Indian languages, and also by the Persian word *mulk* that is yet another word for the country in others.⁷ Both originally meant one's personal address. Both came to acquire a highly reified aspect when enlarged and strenuously reinscribed upon a subcontinent which could only be abstractly imagined as one's own. One of the characteristics of modern patriots like Swami Vivekananda and later, Gandhi, would be to try and travel across the length and breadth of the country: the first step towards being an Indian in the true sense of the word. Obviously, being an Indian involved effort. It was acquired knowledge, not an instinct.

A regional patriotism had emerged simultaneously with pan Indian or subcontinental patriotism in the 19th century. This, in fact, could incorporate the earlier meanings of *desh* more successfully, a region being a more familiar land and people, often unified by at least a shared language. Certainly in Bengal, outpourings of patriotic songs from the late 19th century expressed love more immediately and vividly for the land of Bengal. India, in contrast, appeared in Bengali patriotic imagination as a project of power and glory, more difficult to clasp as an intimate love object. We may contrast here two patriotic songs of Rabindranath himself. In one he evokes the ancient land of Bharatbarsha as the cradle of human civilisation: "...The dawn first appeared on these skies, here the first holy chants were recited/From these forests, for the first time, faith and knowledge spread across the world along with poetry and tales..." The civilisation is quite unmistakably Hindu – a problem which we discuss later. The other is a song about the land of Bengal which has been adopted as the national song of Bangladesh:

My golden Bengal, I do love you so/For ever and ever, your skies, your winds, make music in my soul. Mother, in spring your mango groves enchant me with their fragrance. Late autumn fills your paddy fields with a sweetly smiling bounty...(all translations in the essay are mine).

The song is about a familiar landscape, the love that its beauty evokes.⁸

If the spatial imagination about a region was both precise and sensual, the subcontinent, in contrast, was best conceptualised as history rather than as familiar land. When a strong cartographic imagination emerged from late colonial times, it was the shadowy, vaguely feminine shape of the outer contours of the

map that was made familiar in popular representations. India was preferred as an idealised form rather than as concrete, sensuous geography.⁹

Unintended Product

Things do change, however. In 1888, John Strachey, a senior colonial official, had confidently assured Cambridge University undergraduates in a speech:

There is not, and never was an India ...no Indian nation, no people of India of which we hear so much That men of the Punjab, Bengal, the North West Provinces and Madras should ever feel that they belong to one Indian nation, is impossible...¹⁰

This can be classified as a remarkable instance of famous last words. Even as he spoke, the very thing he strenuously denied an existence, was already in the making, provoked into life largely by the system of governance that he himself was a part of. The Indian Empire, inaugurated with much fanfare a little more than a decade back, was transfiguring fast into a nation of Indian people who came to feel with increasing conviction that they belonged to a shared country, they were one people. That this was a modern beginning in no way subtracted from the rapid growth and intensity of this conviction. History, after all, is not destiny.

Indian patriotism, as a felt emotion, was the unintended product of colonial rule which bestowed political unity, and which tied up dispersed geographies into a singular whole. And which, moreover, through largely similar racial, economic and administrative policies, stirred up very similar grievances, aspirations and emotions among people who were scattered around a subcontinent. It was, finally and supremely, anti-colonial popular movements that melded very large, disparate numbers of people into a strong, affective community. The sense of subcontinental belonging that consequently developed, was powerful, real, personal. Even though of relatively recent growth, it, nonetheless, remains an important commitment for large numbers of Indians even in post-colonial times. One may even say that it was patriotism that gave birth to India as a country. But the problem was that this origin is generally not considered enough: it is too recent and contingent, not organic, not a structural necessity or a long-standing historical compulsion. It became necessary, therefore, to imagine other, more enduring and innate bases, in order to justify and propel the emergent patriotism.

2

All this suggests something very curious for our modern times: strong patriotic emotions in search of a country. That meant inventing a single country called India, beyond, over and above the relatively recent history of colonial unification and the strongly felt unity that came out of the freedom movements. India must appear as an enduring organism, not the contingent outcome of a particular historical conjuncture. But what can we find in our history that is old enough, strong enough and generalised enough to provide a persuasive basis for a subcontinental felt unity and historical continuity?

For a large number of modern Hindus, engaged in the problem of defining a country and a history, the answer was simple and obvious, one that had been formulated and embellished from the

19th century. For them, Hinduism alone could bear the weight of that requirement. Hindus, they claimed, are the most numerous of Indian people, and they alone provide an unbroken historical continuity that is older than what other Indian communities can offer. What is dangerous about this majoritarianism and claims to antiquity is that there are very old and extremely populous non-Hindu communities in the country whose contributions to cultural and political traditions are rich, diverse, massive. To call India Hindu would be to exclude those critical masses: not only at the cost of crippling and impoverishing our lives, cultures and histories unimaginably, but also by leaving these vast numbers of Indians stranded in their ancestral homelands without a real entitlement. Hindus, moreover, are stratified among themselves by divisions of caste, region, language and sect. The practice that most of them have held in common, in some shape, has been some variant of caste hierarchy. There was, moreover, a range of upper caste domestic prescriptions that upwardly mobile "lower castes" tended to follow. These commonalities, however, had come under critical scrutiny from the 19th century among large sections of Hindus. They could hardly provide a consensual ground for unity among all modern Hindus, let alone all Indians.

Scriptures and Customs

Undeterred by these problems that beset their claims to the natural unity of all Hindus, 19th century Hindu revivalists most often located cultural continuity and civilisational singularity for Hindu-Indians in ancient brahmanical texts which included the mythological, philosophical and metaphysical systems, legal statutes, and classical Sanskrit literature. These had been compiled and published by 19th century Indologists, Indian and western, and had become internationally known and renowned. In fact, the colonial state itself had bestowed upon parts of it a great visibility and sanction. It had declared that in all areas of belief, ritual, marriage, divorce, dower, adoption, succession, inheritance and caste, Hindus and Muslims would be governed by their scripture and custom and the state could only intervene if it was shown that present practice contravened more ancient and pristine tradition. Part of their decision was, no doubt, dictated by calculations of political expediency: non-interference in intimate and private spheres, they thought, would reconcile and pacify a subjugated people. But there was also a genuine admiration for the systems of custom, statutes and traditions. When a compilation was made from various scriptural traditions that dealt with Hindu belief and usage, Bentham, the great Utilitarian, read it in translation and decided that aspects of it should be included in the universal legal code that he planned to write.¹¹

These beliefs and practices constituted an area where the colonial state abrogated its own sovereignty. This, in turn, meant that in this domain Indians were still not entirely colonised. Hindu scripture and custom thus were transfigured as precious vestiges of past freedom and as nuclei of future self-governance. Throughout the 19th century, liberal reformers and Hindu orthodoxy quarrelled about what uses should be made of this freedom: should it be a source of introspection and self-reform, especially for caste and gender? Or should it reinforce tradition, preserved from all corruption and change that accrued from

foreign influence? Should one revere it altogether as that which made the country, or should one alter it to remake a country on lines of social and gender justice?

Coming close to ideas that are associated with the conservative parliamentarian Edmund Burke, but which actually go back to late medieval English writings, especially of Fortescue, Indian conservatives creatively transfigured certain cornerstones of western conservatism. Their arguments went thus: If certain institutions and traditions had survived through the ages, including eras of conquests and foreign domination, then their content was axiomatically good. That even foreign invaders had not disturbed them, doubly proves their worth. Even if their logic or ethical properties are no longer clear, their historical continuity and persistence demonstrate their relevance and utility for modern times. Reformers cannot judge them by their own time-bound fragile reason that is the product of a single generation's thinking: whereas the laws and customs that had survived centuries contain the wisdom of past generations. They stand on the bedrock of a very old historical consensus.¹² In its own way, the argument invoked what Pocock has described for another context as the democracy of the dead.¹³

There was a second string to the argument. Do not these apparently problematic traditions about caste and gender come enfolded within what even the west admits to be great and civilised? Our profoundly deep and complex philosophical systems, our wonderful classical literature? If we now question them, do we not undermine the entire tradition, the obviously great and the good, along with those few elements that now appear to be problematic?

These were insistent and persistent arguments, rehearsed again and again, in novels, drama, tracts, polemical essays, throughout the colonial period. Some of them, revised and recontextualised, have been recently resuscitated in certain strands of post-colonial scholarship. They recur very often in *Gora* where we find some of their strongest and most passionate articulations as well as their most effective refutations.

If all patriotic projects demand adoration, the patriotism of a colonised people demands it in ways that are more than usually fierce, compelling and poignant. If reforms are allowed, would they not dent that pride, admit of faultlines and injustices? If fallibility is acknowledged, then how can patriotism cope with the question of self-esteem which is already so damaged by colonial racism? And, finally, if traditions that proved so unjust to low castes and women could not be an adequate basis for patriotism, then what alternatives would Hindu or Indian histories allow?¹⁴ *Gora* tried to clear an alternative path.

3

To this Hindu nationalist argument, *Anandamath* had added yet another twist. It sought to short circuit problems of social injustice and divisions with the resolution of a nationalist war. The self-divided Hindu people were made whole and one when they confronted what the novel described as their historical enemy, the Muslims. Community and country merged to create the body of a goddess who sought vengeance against Muslims. Low castes and upper castes fought together, for as long as the enemy ruled,

caste should be suspended: even though, not for ever, and even though leaders were invariably upper castes.

Tagore and Swadeshi Movement

The violent logic of *Anandamath* resolved the problems of fragmentation and discontinuity in a way that was coherent and complete within its own terms. This, however, was a resolution that Rabindranath deeply feared. Bankimchandra had eschewed many of his own earlier denunciations of class, caste and gender injustices to reach the point of Hindu nationalism. Rabindranath, too, had gone through different phases of social and political thinking like Bankimchandra.¹⁵ In his case, however, the trajectory moved in the reverse direction. Just before he wrote *Gora*, between 1905 and 1908, the country had seen a widespread popular agitation against the colonial state which had recently and very arbitrarily partitioned the province of Bengal. There had been boycotts and burnings of British cloth, social avoidance of Indians who occupied official positions or were loyal to the state, huge demonstrations and picketing of foreign goods shops. Eventually, there began assassinations of individual British officials.

Rabindranath had been deeply involved with the early phase of the movement and had fashioned many of its cultural signs and symbols. Along with other nationalist leaders, he, at this point of time, had used Hindu rituals for mass mobilisation, and he defended Hindu social institutions and statutes, even reconfiguring caste as a consensual and rational division of labour that secured social harmony. In the same vein, he also endorsed brahmanical gender practices like widow immolation as consensual.¹⁶ He wrote in *Swadeshi Samaj* in 1904:

Will not Hinduism be able to bring every one of us day by day into bonds of affinity and devotion to this Bharatbarsha of ours – the abode of our gods, the hermitage of our rishis, the land of our forefathers?...¹⁷

There are such strong recurrences of these themes and even these words in *Gora*, that it seems undeniable that Rabindranath of the Swadeshi era provided the model for the patriotic language of the early *Gora* in the novel. The novel is, therefore, autobiographical in a split mode. The early and the later *Gora* reflect the two different political moments in Rabindranath's life.

Even in this phase, however, Rabindranath remained, in many important ways, quite different from other Hindu nationalists. The differences grew over time, increasingly isolating him from the movement until he turned into its most outspoken critic. He saw Muslims as equal compatriots.¹⁸ Violence horrified him, whether it was directed against state officials or against Muslims. He was insistent that Indian civilisation had always been nourished by many cultures. Some of them initially arrived with foreign conquests but they then found a home in this country. This included the west whose intellectual and cultural resources cannot be spurned even in the age of colonialism without a fatal cultural self-denial.¹⁹ Above all, he valued rural uplift, peasant welfare, only too acutely aware of perennial peasant poverty and ignorance for which Indian landlords were to blame as much as colonial revenue settlements. As the movement progressed, he became increasingly critical of the upper class and

upper caste Hindu nationalist leadership which unthinkingly commanded and coerced low caste and Muslim peasants to burn cheap foreign cloth while at the same time doing little or nothing for their welfare.²⁰

In the course of the Swadeshi movement, low castes and Muslims had protested against enforced boycott of foreign goods and this got extended into violent communal clashes. At that point, Rabindranath decisively turned away from the movement. He reviewed his social and political beliefs and concluded that untouchability and communalism were no less important problems than colonial injustice: that as long as the problem of peasant poverty and exploitation remained, the elite nationalist leadership had no right to command villagers to conform to the movement.²¹

Gora: Expression of New Political Turn

Gora was the first literary expression of the new political turn which would deepen over time. It was also one of the first novels that he wrote on modern domestic, political and social situations, the very first of them being *Chokher Bali* and *Noukadubi*. More than its predecessors, *Gora* traverses multiple social worlds which are repeatedly brought into interfaces, collisions and reconciliations. It is also more densely populated than *Chokher Bali*, filled with several twisted subplots, many voices, speeches and cultural signs: men and women from liberal, orthodox and revivalist backgrounds, from colonial, rural and metropolitan locales, from modern nuclear families and from large and intricately interrelated joint family households. The language is chaste and classicist, though the even tenor is often broken up by diverse vernacular speech inflections.

With a sort of a fairly mechanical symmetry, the novel counterposes one good and one bad Brahmo against one good and one bad Hindu: Paresch and Haran represent the two Brahmo faces while Anandamoyee and Krishnadayal are the two different Hindus. The two duos sum up, between them, the strength and the problems of the faiths in the present. The novel is enormously dialogic and every stance is allowed extensive self-representation and different rhetorical styles. In its heteroglossia and dialogic organisation, as well as in many of its arguments, it anticipated much of the later *Ghare Baire*, the novel that reflected on the Swadeshi experience. It is curious that even though *Gora* is written just after the Swadeshi experience, the novelistic time is pushed back into the 19th century. *Ghare Baire*, written nearly a decade later, reflects on the Swadeshi times. Perhaps, Rabindranath waited till the much abhorred partition of Bengal was rescinded before he would articulate his critique of the anti-partition movement. Nearer in time to the experience, he withheld his immediate responses and searched for antecedents of its problematic aspects in the past.

Though he brought into *Gora* many of the insights that came from his own involvement with the movement, he located the fictional situation in the 1870s, when a conservative Hindu nationalism stridently opposed liberal thinking and social reform in the name of the cultural distinctiveness of Hindus.²² *Gora* is a patriotic young man from an educated, orthodox brahman family, towering over his friends and family by the passion and

power of his patriotic vision, his uncompromising and fearless opposition to colonial racism. He loves all Indians, Muslims and untouchables included, but the one category of Indians he cannot stand are liberal reformers. They are cultural renegades to him, pale mimics of their colonial masters, trying to destroy something in the name of reform for which they have neither understanding nor sympathy. To declare his own distance from them, he demonstratively adheres to all orthodox forms of behaviour, especially in areas of gender and caste pollution taboos. He does not eat the food cooked by his mother whom he loves with all his heart because she takes water from the hand of a low caste domestic help, Lachhmia.

It has been said by Bengali literary historians that Swami Vivekananda provided the model for Gora's character. There is some truth in this, although I think that Rabindranath's own ideas at two different phases constitute the two phases of Gora more accurately. Both Vivekananda and Gora tried to improve lower caste conditions with upper caste social welfare work, both developed a powerful patriotic prose, both organised middle class Hindu youth to form bands of Hindu missionaries and both equated patriotism with Hindu pride. There may be yet another shared trait. Gora has to constantly repress his doubts about Hindu social institutions in order to inculcate Hindu pride. Sumit Sarkar argues that there was a split between Vivekananda's private utterances and correspondences on the one hand, where he would be sharply acerbic about Hindu norms, and his public speeches and writings on the other, where he concerned himself exclusively with the richness of Hindu civilisation. There were also moments of oscillation between self-confidence and despair about the Hindu missionary project.²³

There are several counterpoints to Gora. His mother Anadamoyee is a remarkably clear-eyed person who refuses to accept any ritual that divides man from man. She cannot despise anyone because of birth or faith and her love goes out, easily and irresistibly, to all human beings. Gora comes in touch with a liberal reformist family, argues with the gentle, introspective father, Paresh, and falls in love with his adopted daughter Sucharita just as his friend and disciple Benoy comes to love Sucharita's adoptive sister Lalita. There are interesting divergences in their speech patterns. Anadamoyee speaks with great emotional depth, appealing to the reason of universal human love and worth. Paresh speaks gently but logically, in measured intellectual cadences. Lalita, who would later marry Gora's friend Benoy, reshapes her father's logic into a sharp argumentativeness. Gora himself speaks in hyperbolic rhetoric, the passion of his language, metaphors and images overriding and sweeping away the effects of calm reasoning, logical arguments, the gentle words of love. Sucharita wavers between her father and Gora – as does Benoy – her intellect responding to the social and historical arguments that Paresh assembles to reply to Gora's Hindu nationalism. At the same time, Gora conjures up with his memorable rhetoric, a vision of country and love of such force that she is enchanted: for her, the country is entirely an effect of the words of her beloved. She falls in love with both at the same time when, for the first time, Gora turns to her and weaves, Othello like, the powerful magic of his words.

Source of Power of Hindu Nationalism

Rabindranath had put his finger on a very important source of the power of Hindu nationalism when he showed the effects of Gora's rhetoric: when verbal images can defeat historical evidence and the imperative of justice: simultaneously displacing the living with an abstraction, a reification, and, in the same move, investing the abstract with compelling human qualities, making it more real than the experienced or the historical. Hindu nationalism – Rabindranath would say, all nationalisms – transacts in the currency of the imagined made real with words: the imagined and the idealised then overwrite and obscure the world in which we live. Strangely for a poet, he distrusted the transfiguring power of words, the ease with which they create a felicitous world which appears as more real than the actual.

Hating himself for his un-Hindu act – pre-marital love being anathema for a non-consensual Hindu marriage system and Sucharita is a woman from another community – he hardens his orthodoxy, harshly represses his love for Sucharita and his own doubts about caste divisions and domestic laws. As the rift is about to become final, Gora discovers that he is actually an adopted child, of Irish parentage, his parents were killed during the mutiny of 1857. The discovery, at one stroke, removes him from his family, his Hindu and brahmanical ancestry. Being an European by birth, and a Mutiny orphan, he also loses his affiliation to the lineage of anti-colonial upsurges.

The brahmanical Hindu patriot Gora represents a part of Rabindranath that the author had only recently discarded. But Rabindranath knew its compelling power. Gora, even as a Hindu hardliner, represents a bright light, he articulates the majesty of a subjugated people rising up to confront injustice and racism. Some aspects of Hindu patriotism did embody the proud defiance of a people expected to be cowering under colonial misrule, humiliated and stigmatised. Gora is its self-expression at its strongest point. What makes him especially convincing and compelling, however, is that he himself is torn: he admires the Muslim, he is furious when he sees the low caste Hindu exploited and insulted by the high caste Hindu. Despite that, he feels that in colonial times, patriotism must be based on total love and respect for all that Hindu India has or is. There is no other comparable cultural resource with which we can approach and confront the racism of foreign rule.

Early in the novel, his friend Benoy asks him: Tell me, Gora, is Bharatbarsha something real to you? Do you see her clearly? How do you see her?

Benoy is uncertain about the reality of the icon for whose sake Gora asks him to turn away from a Brahma girl who attracts him. Wherein lies the intoxicating and compelling power of the country that must be worth the sacrifice? Unless he, too, can experience the reality as an actual presence the way Gora can, he cannot part from his new romantic emotions.

Gora says:

My country is real and clear to me all the time, but you will not find her in Marshman Sahib's History of India, she lives inside my heart... I may lose my way, I may drown and die...but that blessed refuge still exists, my country, always filled with wealth, knowledge, faith.

Falsehood surrounds us and what we seem to see is no reality... this Calcutta of yours, these mercantile offices, these courtrooms, these concrete bubbles... can this be my Bharatbarsha? here we live false lives, do meaningless work, this Bharatbarsha is a magician's trick, it has no real life... There is a true Bharat, we need to search her out, go there, draw out our lifeblood, our souls, our wisdom from that place... We have weakened ourselves with self loathing, once we embrace pride for the entire country, the truth of India will become manifest.²⁴

Gora asserts that the reality of the country is something different from and opposed to its actual appearance. Its inner truth must be seized as an act of faith, a mystical realisation, as a project. It is really a future that must masquerade as a past and a present in order to come into being.

He also admits that the apparent India is suffused with misery. But she is still a goddess and we must approach her as such. He feels confident that a movement will arise to confront humiliation. But that will arise out of our faith in the goddess: "Benoy, I see my goddess, she is not bathed in beauty, I find her in the midst of famine, poverty, suffering, she is insulted. She is not to be worshipped with songs and flowers, but with lives and blood. I can see against the bloodshot sky, the birth of a new, radiant dawn of freedom."²⁵

Political Necessity

The goddess, thus, is a political necessity. The present misery of India is simultaneously invoked and abolished. At one level, it must be seen as a false cover, masking the real with *maya* or divine enchantment, filled with the fleeting and the false that overwrite Truth which is constant. But, at another, simultaneous level, it is also a necessary adornment of the goddess because the perception of her misery is also a call for battle. In Gora's description of the goddess, two distinct historical layers fuse. One is the time of the goddess of *Anandamath* who manifested herself to Hindu patriots in the midst of a devastating famine and war in the late 18th century when colonial rule had just been established. The other is the immediate past of the Swadeshi movement with its Extremist rhetoric of blood and thunder, of battle like confrontations, and the beginnings of revolutionary terrorist action of political assassinations.

When Sucharita presses him to clarify the precise location of the real country, Gora invokes the ancient past, the historical continuity of its culture which transcends occasional perversions of its eternal Truth. History is destiny, history is country, the past is our real place.²⁶

Benoy vs Gora

Benoy vacillates. At times, he is entirely persuaded by the power of Gora's charismatic presence, his words. Away from the charismatic being, however, the power vanishes and he is once more beset with doubts and his own transgressive emotions and needs. Ultimately, he decides to choose the latter, telling Gora that he must defy his Hindu nationalist project as he feels that he can see the country that Gora wants him to see only through Gora's speech, not through his own experiences. Before he leaves Gora, however, he talks about his own love to his friend. He also talks about women who must live in

freedom to come into their own, to acquire an independent and creative identity that Hindu domestic laws deny them. His words, in turn, strengthen and thrust up on the surface, Gora's own need to love, his own appreciation of the potential that women have and are made to hide. Though he represses these thoughts immediately, Benoy's words work within him, counterposing the image of fulfilment to the bleak aridity that his own project involves. Experience and needs, thus, ultimately, give the simple words of Benoy a greater effectivity. In a similar way, too, we realise what Anandamoyee had meant when she repeatedly told Benoy and Gora that she, too, had been orthodox once. But when she had held the infant Gora in her arms, she realised the falsehood and inhumanity of social divisions. Once Gora's parentage is made clear, the words stand explained: as when she encountered a helpless child from another religion and community, a child whose touch should be considered polluting, her felt love and her experience of maternal feelings swept away the structure of prohibitions and exclusions she had been reared on. Once the beloved baby made her feel that its caste or castelessness does not matter, she grasped that the principles of purity and pollution themselves were untrue.

Sucharita, similarly, fleetingly glimpses the country of Gora's vision when she listens to him. She falls in love with Gora and with his words. But her own clear intelligence, refined by the calm logical reasoning her father has taught her, makes her question the fundamental points of Gora's argument, again and again. It is only out of her great love for Gora that she forces herself to accept the Hindu discipline that Gora thrusts upon her as her patriotism. But, eventually, she realises it means that she must kill her love for Gora and accept a non-consensual marriage with a man of the proper caste and lineage. It is, finally, her love for her sister Lalita who marries Benoy, defying religious divisions and social stigma, that makes her turn away from Gora's path. She cannot abandon Lalita in the cause of Hindu nationalism. Again, it is the experience of love that leads on to a consideration of social injustice and tyranny. It triumphs over the mystical vision which wields a disciplinary power.

Sucharita asks Gora why the country should be identified with a faith. Isn't faith larger than the country, she asks. Gora retorts: our faith is our history, it is what the country has always had... this is true of all countries, each of them lives through a faith that expresses its essence. For India, that faith is Hinduism. That alone can establish a link between our pasts and presents, can make our country as one.²⁷

"Whatever exists here, we need to embrace without qualifications.. If we are different from the west, that does not matter..." He admits that caste may seem apparently unjust and irrational. Many problems do flow from it. Yet, it is still a part of our faith which has produced so much that is eminently rational, humane, profound. The whole must surpass the part and justify it.²⁸ Paresch argues with him that even if there is a higher purpose in Hindu caste, we cannot see it. All we can see are walls of loathing for human beings who are not considered human. Gora rebuts: If we see no reason for some elements but can still

see that the entire thing is, nonetheless, marvellous, then we must accept the whole and admit that those elements, too, must have a higher reason which we cannot see because we have mortgaged our own vision, we now see with foreign eyes which are critical and sceptical. Once we take on the entire thing with love, the meaning will be made clear. If we discard and change the part, we will destroy a whole, wonderful civilisation, we will kill our own selves, our identity. As he says,

Reform? that will come later. The immediate need is for wholehearted love, to adore the country, to be one with her. Once you try to reform, you pull her down, you degrade her with criticism, you set yourself above her.²⁹

So what is past, what is memory and ideal, what is hidden and opaque is more real than what is experienced, present and visible. This substitution becomes a real need as actual experience offers no real resource. What he sees always lets him down. Gora goes to the village and admits to himself that Muslims have stronger ties of mutual self-help and solidarity because they are not divided by caste. He himself breaks brahmanical taboos and drinks water from the hands of a low caste as he is incensed by high caste oppression. He comes back dejected, he cannot now find the Bharatbarsha he loves anywhere. In the city, he loves a woman of a different faith and knows he has to give her up. Far worse, he must advise her to kill her radiant individuality and accept a loveless marriage with an incompatible husband. He loves his mother but he cannot eat what she cooks. He parts with his dearest friend when he marries a girl from another religion and caste. He has only contempt for his orthodox disciples who love to despise and hate the non-Hindu, the low caste, the woman. Yet, he is destined to have them as his only companions. He realises that love has no place in his Hindu Bharat where divisions are more meaningful and sanctioned.

Sacrifice for Hindu India

His dejection only strengthens his conviction. His love for the Bharat of his imagination is stronger than all other ties. He must ruthlessly suppress his doubts and needs to reach out to her. He prepares to build a cocoon of high brahmanical practices around himself. It is a sacrifice that Hindu India deserves. In a sense, he stands at the crossroads even before he comes to discover his origins. He has either to rethink from the vantage point of his actual experience or he has to invest all in an act of faith. His self-discovery clarifies and consolidates what was already at work in him, it closes off the other options.

The self-discovery stands for two critical departures from his earlier commitment to Hindu nationalism. First, Gora is, in an instant, made bereft of his past. If the past, in his case, was living out a lie, then his life has to reinvent its meaning on entirely new terms. In his earlier paradigm, however, that would be an impossible self-impoverishment. Is it possible to break from the past and yet lay claim to a human identity that is worth living for? Can we dispense with the meanings that our pasts had prepared for us? Can patriotism develop an identity that is not entirely derived from the past?

Second, his love for Bharatbarsha had been a very real experience for him, the most vivid and powerful identification and

emotion that had stood higher than his more immediate and personal commitments. Even if it had been built on false premises, it was, nonetheless, a felt emotion, a true love. It remains so even after his self-discovery. He knows now that it is possible for a man defined as an alien, a foreign element, to identify with India, with her people. Since he knows now that patriotism is not mortgaged to the accident of birth, the compelling power of Hindu nationalism – that the past, the faith, the birth need to be located in the soil of the country in order to function as conditions of belonging – is cancelled out by his own life.

Gora now chooses to love the country and people of India. In the same measure, he develops a new understanding about freely chosen love as the basis for all commitments and identifications: personal and collective. If one can love the country only in the freedom of self-determination, then freedom should become a value in all spheres of life: a value that the country herself must respect and which it must never try to abolish or qualify even in the name of patriotism. He turns to Sucharita and, for the first time, holds out his hand to her.

Narrative Device

In the novel, the whiteness of Gora functions also as the narrative device for the incorporation of western traditions and resources – which Indians have chosen to identify with and have recreated as their own – within Indian history. In his subsequent writings like *Nationalism*, Rabindranath would warn urgently against an expulsion of western values from Indian lives. Gora can be both an European and an Indian. In fact, the naming is significant. The word means white and signifies both the white race as well as the beloved Vaisnav saint of early modern Bengal, the great Chaitanya who was also called Gouranga or Gora.

The accident of birth releases him from the burden of his caste purity which had oppressed him and distanced him from his own people. He knows: From north to south, from east to west, all the temples of India are closed to me. I can no longer dine with any caste. In an instant, my whole life has disappeared, I am left without an identity.³⁰

What does he make of this loss, the disappearance of the past which, in his earlier views, represented true identity, individual and collective? He goes to Paresh with joy in his heart – not because he is a white man, but because he now has become an Indian. It is not his Indian identity that he must forswear, it is his caste identity. He can choose to be an Indian, but he could not have chosen his caste which, truly, is a function of birth, origin and faith. "...I have tried so long and so hard to merge myself in India but something would obstinately stand in the way... I tried to reconcile the obstacles to love with what I love but I could never do it. That is why I never dared to look at Bharat as she is, I feared to do that. I built up a perfect ideal and I enclosed it within a fortress... now that fortress has disappeared and I have escaped into the lap of my real country. I no longer need to gild and embellish what I love more than my life and I can begin my real work at last – the welfare of 25 crores of my people. At last I become what I have always wanted to be but never could be – an Indian."

The real and the actual, the experience and the desire are reconciled. Gora is released from the brahman and Hindu identity and he is set free among all Indians. All the divisions that Hindu caste had so inexorably set up vanish with the loss of that identity.

What about faith and country, how are they to be reconciled? Gora turns to reformist Paresch, since he no longer need to fear change or reform: Now introduce me to that god who belongs to all, Hindus, Muslims and Christians, whose temples are not closed to any, who is not the god of Hindus but is the god of all Indians.

If a particular faith no longer defines the country, what is the country, then, after all? Gora returns to his mother in the evening:

Mother, you are that mother of mine. I searched for her everywhere and all the time she sat at home, waiting for me...you have no caste, no laws, no hatred, you are the image of love. You are my Bharatbarsha. Mother, now call Lachhmia, ask her to give me a glass of water.³¹

As he returns to his mother and Lachhmia, he returns to another definition of the country: it is the people whom he must love, he must love them as they are in all their squalor, misery and contradictions. The goddess disappears as the mother returns.

4

This is a very different patriotic resolution which is immensely more human than the Hindu nationalist one. It speaks to us today in many ways. We still hear shrill arguments for an identification between Hindu and Indian; for cherishing customs and traditions indiscriminately, because they are "our" and because the west stigmatise them; for making the idea of the country more real than its people and land: for demanding the forced abandonment of beliefs and practices that are not Hindu-Indian, be they public expressions of romance, public drinking by women, or the right to have a faith which is not Hindu. What remains strikingly shared across a 100 years is the persistent belief that the country can be called free when its people – untouchables, peasants, women, the poor – live in slavery. *Gora* problematises and challenges these assumptions and claims in a way that remain, even today, the most effective rebuttals. It, moreover, carries an implicit argument that is extremely troubling for mainstream nationalism and even for the patriotism of the secular variety. If the country becomes a country of one's own only through an act of love chosen in freedom, can patriotism then demand unconditional and eternal love, affiliation and identification? What happens when a part of the people no longer identify with the country and want another one of their own? Can patriotism force belonging, command love?

But, at the same time, the patriotic resolution in *Gora* is not as seamless and internally coherent as the Hindu nationalist ones. If pride in Hindu history is not an ingredient of patriotic love, then on what basis does one identify exclusively with the specific people of a designated territory? Gora tells Anandomoyee that she is the real face of the motherland because she has no caste or hatred in her. The vision of the just and egalitarian country is life affirming, but does it describe an actual past or present? Or, does

here, too, an ideal future masquerade as a continuous and actual past – something that Gora's earlier rhetoric had performed for a different purpose? The new vision triumphs over the old because it turns to the people with all their problems and commits Gora to their welfare. The layer of mystification is peeled away from the imagined goddess and the miseries of the people can now be admitted. But now a new problem appears. Why should mutual care and concern for justice be confined arbitrarily to only one people and not embrace the entire humanity? There does not seem to be an adequately powerful reason for this overflowing love to contract itself into a particular love, unless the accident of birth in a designated country is revived again, with all its attendant problems.

In a poem written soon after the novel, Rabindranath tried to find a way of merging universal love with love for Bharatbarsha. In "Bharat Tirtha", he describes India as the confluence of all civilisations, the concourse of all the peoples of the world: the Sakas, the Hunas, Pathans, Mughals and the British. Aryas, non-Aryas, high and low castes, all faiths. Here God in Man is realised. Since India has historically been open to all cultures – being so densely marked by so many as to reach the status of being unmarked by any particular one – that to love her is to love the entire world. India, then, is more than a country, it is a microcosm of the world itself, it is a symbol of the universal. The condition for this great distinction is to accept all that come from all sources, to abolish the boundaries between the authentic-indigenous and foreign-alien.

Courageous Vision

This was a very courageous vision to nurture and proclaim in a colonised situation when anxieties about colonised identities were acute: when the line between cultural openness which signified self confidence on the one hand, and acculturation by an imperial culture, an abject surrender of identity to the victor on the other, were so finely drawn as to be non-existent. It was, a 100 years back, the strongest rebuttal of the Hindu nationalism of the orthodox or of Bankimchandra. It remains the best argument against the violence and cultural closures of today's Hindutva.

At the same time, in this vision, patriotism straddles an ambiguous and unstable ground. It, too, uses the past, albeit in a transformed way, to overcome the narrowness of the present. That historical characteristic, that inherited trait of the Indian past – its openness to all cultures – then equally ethnocentrically, claims exclusively for itself something that should be

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