

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY  
PEER REVIEWEDTHE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE: A  
CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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**Introduction:**

Innumerable difficulties are experienced when one tries to examine the ideas of Tagore with a view to finding out his political philosophy. In this connection, sometimes one faces a basic question, namely, whether or not Tagore had a political philosophy. In support of the contention that he did not have a political philosophy, so many arguments are put forward. Some of them may be stated as follows: that Tagore was essentially a poet and he neither had the temperament nor the logical consistency of a political philosopher; that his use of the terms, such as, freedom, society, nation, nationality etc., was vague and often misleading; that he was *drawn* into politics and was forced to come out with some political statements and addresses by sheer force of circumstances.

Rabindranath Tagore was not content with the philosophical discussion of the problems of man and the world; rather he carefully and skillfully analyzed the root causes of these evils and suggested measures for removing them. For the peace, prosperity and progress of the world the meeting between the East and the West is indispensable as he wanted the evolution of a cosmopolitan humanist culture. The West needs the creative ideals of the East and the East must find her own balance in science, the magnificent gift that the West can bring to her. "Let us announce to the world that the light of the morning has come, not for entrenching ourselves behind barriers, but for meeting in mutual understanding and trust on the common field of co-operation; never for nourishing a spirit of rejection". (Tagore 1996c: 355) But the West came to the East not with the imagination and sympathy that relate and unite but with a shocking passion for power and wealth. He visualized the fact that commercial and political cannibalism profitably practiced upon foreign races may benefit the West but would bring its own ruin. He proclaimed that the meeting between the East and the West was indispensable for the general progress of humanity and for the establishment of a durable peace in the world. So, the West should not crush the East but should extend its hands with cooperative zeal. "We have to consider that

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the west is necessary to the East. We are complementary to each other because of our different outlooks upon life which have given us different aspects of truth”. (Tagore 2002: 67)

**Nationalism:**

Nationalism is generally directed to a narrow channel that adversely affects the interests of other countries; if love of one's country is taken to imply hatred for other countries. According to Tagore, such Nationalism is bound to stand in the way of human development. It was because of that the two countries were engaged in war. Every child in France was taught to hate the Germans and vice versa. Such feelings are not conducive to the maintenance of peace in the world. Every nation tries to add to its glory and prestige and power by conquering territories that call for imperialism. It also brings their own ruin as Tagore mentions clearly, “real power is not in the weapons themselves but in the man who wields those weapons and when he, in his eagerness for power, multiplies his weapons at the cost of his own soul, then, it is he who is in even greater danger than his enemies”. (Tagore 2002: 32) Extreme nationalism creates a spirit of intolerance. Under it, humanity cannot progress. It is under a spirit of cooperation that humanity progresses. When Japan was busy in conquering China and other countries, it did not care for the sufferings of its victims. According to Tagore, nationalism is an organized self-interest of the whole people and the organization of politics and commerce are for selfish ends and an organized power for exploitation. Hence Tagore said about Japan's aggressive nationalism – “I can see her motto, taken from science, survival of the fittest, writs large at the entrance of her present day history - the motto whose meaning is, Help yourself, and never heed what is costs to others”. (Tagore 2002: 33) It admits that individual citizens of one's nationality are always right, whereas others are always wrong. It is prejudiced, jaundiced and inhuman.

Tagore took the view that since nationalism emerged in the post-religious laboratory of industrial-capitalism, it was only an “organization of politics and commerce” (*Nationalism* 7), that brings “harvests of wealth” (*Nationalism* 5), or “carnivals of materialism” (Soares 113), by spreading tentacles of greed, selfishness, power and prosperity, or churning up the baser instincts of mankind, and sacrificing in the process “the moral man, the complete man.....to make room for the political and commercial man,

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the man of limited purpose” (*Nationalism* 9). Nationalism, according to Tagore, is not “a spontaneous self-expression of man as social being,” where human relationships are *naturally* regulated, “so that men can develop ideals of life in co-operation with one another” (*Nationalism* 5), but rather a political and commercial union of a group of people, in which they congregate to maximise their profit, progress and power; it is “the organized self-interest of a people, where it is least human and least spiritual” (*Nationalism* 8). Tagore deemed nationalism a recurrent threat to humanity, because with its propensity for the material and the rational, it trampled over the human spirit and human emotion; it upset man’s moral balance, “obscuring his human side under the shadow of soul-less organization” (*Nationalism* 9).

Thus, Tagore called into question both the constructed aspect of nationalism, which stifled the innate and instinctive qualities of the human individual, and its overemphasis on the commercial and political aspects, at the expense of man’s moral and spiritual qualities. Both of these limitations reduced nationalism to an incomplete, monolithic and unipolar ideology—essentially inadequate for human beings given to an inherent multiplicity and seeming contraries, that needed to be unified and synthesized, through a process of soulful negotiation and striking of an axial line between opposites, to create the whole and wholesome person.

As seen previously, Tagore also found the fetish of nationalism a source of war, hatred and mutual suspicion between nations. It breeds exclusivism and dogmatism through the Hegelian dichotomous logic of the self’s fundamental hostility towards the other; thus every nation becomes narcissistic and considers the presence of another a threat to itself; waging war against other nations for its self-fulfillment and self-aggrandizement becomes a justifiable and even ‘holy’ act. Tagore explains: “The Nation, with all its paraphernalia of power and prosperity, its flags and pious hymns, its blasphemous prayers in the churches, and the literary mock thunders of its patriotic bragging, cannot hide the fact that the Nation is the greatest evil for the Nation, that all its precautions are against it, and any new birth of its fellow in the world is always followed in its mind by the dread of a new peril”. (*Nationalism* 17-18)

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Tagore argued that British colonialism found its justification in the ideology of nationalism, as the colonizer came to India and other rich pastures of the world to plunder and so further the prosperity of their own nation. They were never sincere in developing colonized countries/nations, as to convert their 'hunting grounds' into 'cultivated fields' (*Nationalism* 12) would have been contrary to their national interest. Like predators (and nationalism, as we saw above, inherently cultivates a rapacious logic), they thrived by victimising and violating other nations, and never felt deterred in their heinous actions by the principles of love, sympathy or universal fellowship. The logic is simple but cruel, and is sustained by a privileging norm, that to have rich and powerful nations, some nations ought to be left poor and pregnable: "Because this civilization is the civilization of power, therefore it is exclusive, it is naturally unwilling to open its sources of power to those whom it has selected for its purposes for exploitation" (*Nationalism* 13). By its very nature as an organization, Tagore argued, nationalism could ill afford any altruism in this regard.

Tagore was critical of Western nationalism which, he believed, is the training of whole people for a narrow ideal. It fosters separation and is hence against the ideal of the spiritual fellowship of man. Nationalism, he believed, is a great menace. It breeds imperialism. It is an organized gregariousness and mechanical gluttony. It does not represent any principles of social cooperation or spiritual idealism. It is a political and economic organization oriented to exploit the races, particularly of Asia and Africa. He was a staunch critic of aggressive nationalism, which is the harbinger of war. Hence, he says, "the idea of the nation is one of the most powerful and aesthetic that man has invented. Under the influence of its fumes the whole people can carry out its systematic programme of the most virulent self-seeking without being in the least aware of its moral perversion" (Ibid:98) Such a concept of nationalism cannot be accepted by Tagore who sought to establish a relation between man and man by the bond of sympathy and cooperation. It is the guiding spirit of social vitality. Therefore; civilization must take its stand upon the basis of social cooperation and not upon that the economic exploitation and conflict. The poet advised the nations of the West to come out of their narrow shell and build a world community on the plane of harmony and cooperation. Only then the world can live in peace and durable peace can be guaranteed. It can never be attained by an organization like League of Nations or the United Nations Organization purely based on political edifice.

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**Humanism:**

Tagore's political philosophy proceeds from his deep spiritual humanism. In place of transcendentalism, pluralism, and intellectualism, it reposes the value of creative experiments and the jubilation of the human being, which is a replica of the supreme, eternal creativity. "Our greed diverts our consciousness to materials away from the supreme value of truth, which is the quality of the universal being" (Tagore 1996d: 112). His condemnation of power, his bitter denunciation of nationalism and his stress on a social organic living based on kinship and fraternity proceeds from his fundamental humanism. In fact, the whole political philosophy of Tagore was influenced by the principles of humanism. At the same time, he criticized the dictatorial regime that crushes the creative nature of man. He taught us self-respect. He has exhorted us to know ourselves, to develop and depend on our own strength, to rise against tyranny and oppression, to love humanity and to be interested in the world.

Tagore loved mankind or humanity and as such for him, an individual of one nation had the same significance and importance as that of any other nation, without any consideration for the land to which he belonged to. "This is his religion, which is working in the heart of all his religion in the various names and forms". (Ibid: 8) Similarly, he was also very clear in his mind that injustice done to an individual in any part of the world was injustice to the mankind as a whole. The character and standard of judging justice and injustice essentially reminded the same throughout the world. This essential feature made him international in outlook. We may sum up that in view of the fact that politics was not the primary concern to Tagore, yet his idea of political philosophy provided a solution to many of our political problems. He is a guide to humanity and a torchbearer to us. His voice can never be drowned by the taboos of modern age and sometimes in the near or distant future, the world will listen to what he said. The day will come when the world will speak of him not only as a poet but still more as a prophet and above all as a leader whose faith in man remained till the last day of his life. He says; "Immeasurable holy and merciful /Wipe away all stains from this earth". (Tagore 1974b:46)

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Today, when the world is groping in crisis, when the nations of the world are busy in national egotism, exploitation and aggressiveness, when the cold war has every potentiality of conflagration, Tagore's message of unity, harmony, cooperation, fellowship, friendship and fraternity and human relationship can save the world from going back to the law of the jungle.

*The world is frenzied with hatred*

*And torn with strife*

*Its ways are crooked*

*Of lust are its fetters (Ibid: 46)*

The world to him is the habitation of man's spirit and not a mere reservoir of political power. Herein lies the genius of poet and political prophet Rabindranath Tagore. In his writing Tagore sought the unity of mankind. He condemned all forms of partisanism, parochialism, provincialism, narrowness and self-centeredness that are eating the vitals of our national life. Fissiparous tendency if allowed anywhere in the world is the harbinger of strife and war. Tagore, therefore, sought for unity of mankind for a prosperous, peaceful world. He was prepared to walk alone to his goal but he did not wait for tomorrow, as tomorrow dies in the womb of today. He is the true internationalist who advocates that the whole world is like a family. He also argues that the East and the West are complementary to each other. He is for the welfare of all. He envisions a society where there will be no discrimination and no rich and poor, rather everybody will get their due and proper share. We owe to him for his humanistic attitude, where he pleads not only equality and dignity of an individual but also for equal rights and shares in the resources of the world. He wishes to see everybody happy and righteous following the law of the nature so that we can come out of all kinds of chaos and disorder in the world.

**Society and the State:**

Tagore had an interesting conception of *Society* which he carefully distinguished from *the State*. He believed that the character of activity which each of them permits in its domain is basically different. His emphasis on the functions of Society was in a sense similar to that of Marx or of the political pluralists. Like them, he believed in the need to make a distinction between Society and the State. Like them, he also believed in the need to

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restrict the invasion of the State on the territory of Society. While Marx believed in the ultimate socialistic instrumentality of the State at the hands of Society, Tagore remained averse to entrusting it with functions which are already performed by Society.

Tagore's concept of state and society is concerned that he preferred society to remain above the state, so far as India's case is concerned. "A nation, in the sense of the political and economical union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose. Society as such has no ulterior purpose. It is an end in itself". (Tagore 2002:60) In India, through the ages, society has been the main spring of welfare works and institutions of ceaseless constructive activities. Society is natural to man and responds to his social propensities. No doubt, the welfare of the people can be attained both under the state and the society, but the social history of India records paramountcy of the society. In his opinion, man is a social, sensitive, and imaginative being and not a mechanical entity or political animal. Politics is only a specialized and professional aspect of society. His sensitive spirit was repelled by the callousness and the mechanical organized audacity typified in the state. Nevertheless, he never subscribed to the tenets of the absolute elimination of the state. Tagore believed that the principal function of the government was not to remove the obstacle but to enable people to remove their obstacle themselves.

The state as a political concept, seeks to organize for mechanical purpose as the expense of society's effort of a spontaneous self-expression of man as a social animal. The state regulates human relationships by coercion against society's spontaneity. "It is a natural regulation of human relationships, so that men can develop ideals of life in cooperation with one another. It also has a political side but this is only for a special purpose". (Tagore 2002: 60) Society develops ideals of cooperation but regulates discipline by law. The sovereign element of the state accepts no other superior authority. It restricts the positive opportunity of expression and movement. When the flow of life in the social body is obstructed, disaster is inevitable. India was great when the vital functions of social life were carried on uninterruptedly. Therefore, the poet dreamt of creating a human being who should be surrounded by an environment of creative work. But under modern civilization the human personality is imprisoned in a cage shut off from the rest of society. India's

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problem, he considered, was essentially social and the problems have to be approached through social cooperation. “Our real problem in India is not political. It is social. This is a condition not only prevailing in India but among all nations”. (Tagore 2002:105)

Tagore's emphasis on society does not mean that he was an anarchist. On the contrary, he may be called an individualist for he wanted the functions of the state restricted to the hindering of hindrances. The state is neither omnipotent nor infallible to help the fullest development of the individual. According to Tagore; “When this organization of politics and commerce whose other name is the nation, becomes all powerful at the cost of the harmony of the higher social life, then it is an evil day for humanity”. (Tagore 2002: 63) It is society which can lead the people to the path of complete development through social cooperation and solidarity. His sensitive spirit was repelled by the force, callousness and mechanized and organized audacity typified in the state. Nevertheless, like the anarchist he did not deny the existence of the state. He emphasized that the individuals should. enhance their own powers and capacities. If the people do the work themselves, their initiative and capacity are strengthened. So the government instead to removing the obstacles should enable the people to remove their obstacles themselves.

Tagore was aware of the fact that everything was not all right within Society and that its functioning was not always smooth nor the administration of its segments full of justice. Still he thought that it remained a realm of voluntary activity, of a greater degree of moral choices and hence of freedom. Anything which passed from Society to the State meant in ultimate analysis, a loss of freedom. As he put it- “Whatever we may seek from the former (the State) must be paid for out of our freedom. From whichever of its duties our Society seeks relief by getting it done by the State to that extent will it be disabled with an incapability which was not of its essence in the past”. (Sen 1947: 74)

Tagore's emphasis on the preservation of Society's existing functions was indeed very great. He not only pleaded for it on the ground of freedom but also on the ground of what is best suited to our own genius. As he says – “The source of strength in Europe is the State. The State has taken upon itself the responsibility of discharging all welfare efforts the State distributes alms, the State imparts education, the State looks to the preservation of religion. Therefore, the best way open to the European civilization in the matter of saving it

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from internal erosion and attack from without is to strengthen, activate and energise State rule. In our country Society is the source of our welfare. It pervades our Society under the cloak of religion. Consequently, India has so long considered the preservation of her religion, her society, as the only way of self-protection. India has not cast a look at kingdom; she has looked at her Society. Hence, freedom in Society is India's real freedom". (Sen 1947: 76)

**Subordination of the Material and the Political:**

Among his social and political ideas Tagore's plea for the subordination of the material and the political aspects of society is about the strongest. He believed that these two aspects, when remaining unchecked, tend to vitiate the harmonious spirit of social existence and deflect social energies in the direction of corrupt political professionalism, ruthless imperialist expansion and the exploitation of the weak. Tagore used the term 'Nation' to indicate this phenomenon. For him the term 'Nation' stands for "an intense consciousness of self-interest concentrated in political organization". (Tagore 1962: 127) Further, the 'Nation' is concerned more with the material and political aspects of society rather than with anything else. He believed that there are two aspects of a people: (Tagore 1962: 127) its religion, arts, literature, traditions of social responsibility and co-operation on the one hand, and 'material wealth and power' on the other. Out of these two, the 'Nation' is merely concerned with the latter. It is "the presiding genius of the material department of the people". (Tagore 1931: 128) Tagore, in other words, restricted his use of the term 'Nation' to imperialist nations only. He did not use the term in the context of subject nations rallying their strength by appealing to their past glories.

Every society has its economic needs to be satisfied. But when they get overemphasized lot of evils begin to appear in it. The politics of such a society falls into the hands of professional politicians whose business it is to exaggerate the wants of the community. They thus find an excuse for converting the political organization of the community into a machine for external conquests. No country would turn imperialistic, according to Tagore, if its natural requirements and politics are subjected to healthy restraints.

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An imperialist 'Nation' does a great deal of harm to its own people as well as to people whom it subjugates. In its own country, since it artificially inflates people's requirements, it brings about a perversion of normal forms of social relationships. It produces professionalism in place of spontaneous activity; officialism in place of voluntary activity; and egoism and conceit in place of co-operation and sympathy. In short, it succeeds in doing as much harm, at the moral and social level, to its own people as it does to the people it conquers.

The harm done to the people it subjugates, in sum total, is indeed greater. Apart from their economic exploitation, they begin to stagnate under its rule. All their creative urges are either denied an expression or distorted in their effort to prove something or the other in the eyes of their arrogant rulers. What is worse, and here I think Tagore has made an interesting point, all their creative pursuits come to acquire a political orientation.

Tagore himself remained very conscious of this danger. Such an approach, he thought, would bring about an invasion of politics on all forms of our creative activity. It would destroy its spontaneity and make it tendentious.

We are now, in free India, going through the nemesis of the invasion of politics which we allowed on our creative pursuits during our freedom struggle. We now do not confine politics to the political field only. We carry it everywhere. And Tagore with his great foresight was able to see it and warn us of the coming event.

Tagore was one of the few healthy critics of slogans, negative attitudes, political expediencies etc. of Indian nationalists. He could not be convinced of the efficacy of *charkha* as a symbol. For him the non-cooperation and swadeshi movements were far too negative in character. These movements appealed to an emotion, which, he thought, could easily be carried to the persecution of the non-conformist. Above all, he believed that political expediencies could not be morally justified. Moral values retained their imperative character irrespective of political conditions. One of his well-thought-out and carefully planned novels, namely, *The Home and the World* (1920) was devoted to the task of presenting political situations of those days in this country which were riddled with moral dilemmas.

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**Harmony or the Accommodation of diverse elements:**

Having emphasized the attainment of freedom through creative pursuits in one's capacity as an individual, Tagore, then goes on to emphasize a higher realm of freedom which is realized in cooperation with other individuals. The undying tradition of fulfilment through our harmony with all things in Indian philosophy, says Tagore, had left a deep impression on his mind. For him, "freedom in the sense of independence has no content, and therefore no meaning. Perfect freedom lies in the perfect harmony of relationship, which we realize in this world, not through our response to it in knowing but in living". (*Ibid*: 172) In other words, freedom attained through one's creative pursuits is not high enough. Higher than that is the freedom attained in the social field in cooperation with our fellow being.

Freedom in the social realm is attained with the help of 'sympathy' with others. Sympathy, therefore becomes an instrument of integration with a world wider than one's own. It helps us to integrate ourselves with the ever-widening circle of human communities reaching right up to humanity as a whole.

Historically speaking, social integration has been one of the greatest problems in this country. Diverse races pursuing diverse occupations had to be accommodated within a single social system. This gave birth to the idea of the caste system in this country. But soon, says Tagore, the element of sympathy disappeared from it. It, therefore, became an instrument in the hands of a few to maintain their privileges and exploit the rest. Due to the lack of sympathy between the various segments of our society, we lost our freedom in the social field long before we lost it politically. If we had succeeded in accommodating diverse social groups in our society, with due sympathy and justice to each one of them, our experience would have been useful to the humanity as a whole. For at the global level the problem is, more or less, of the same nature, namely, that of accommodation of diverse elements within a single global system. What we are practising today towards certain social groups in this country, by putting them to a position of social disadvantage and humiliation, the imperialist nations are practising towards the subject nations. The problem of accommodation of diverse elements is therefore a national as well as an international problem.

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**The Eastern Mind:**

The arrogance and cultural conceit of the British rulers in India not only plunged Tagore in the task of reviving Indian culture but also made him Asia-conscious. Whenever he visited Asian countries, such as, China and Japan, he tried to point out that they all belonged to one civilization and that they had what he called 'the Eastern Mind' and that their civilization was in no way inferior to the European civilization. While he invariably spoke of the 'solidarity of Asians' and 'the dignity of Eastern Mind' he never fully developed these themes; Tagore felt that Asian countries were not only bound together by history and geography but also by common problems of colonialism, economic backwardness and the need to vindicate their honour as civilized people. Asian countries, he thought, were slowly waking up from their deep slumbers. And their awakening was symbolized by the achievements of Japan. The rise of Japan, but not its subsequent imperialism, was therefore a source of great consolation to Tagore.

Asian countries were no doubt desperately engaged in driving out their foreign rulers but in that process, they must not break into a political hysteria and resort to violence. Such an attitude, Tagore thought, would not be in keeping with the traditions of the East. The East had the ideal of 'love the enemy' and it is going to stick to it. It also has the ideals of non-killing and non-violence, which, Tagore said, they must practise not only at the individual level only but also at the national level.

The Western civilization produced science and technology. They both are remarkable feats of human intellect. The Western humanity, however, has yet to prove that it deserved them. While it made progress in the field of science and technology, it ceased to grow morally. It has now created gigantic organizations against which the individual is powerless. It has organized violence to such an extent that now it is threatening the very existence of man.

Tagore felt very depressed with the outbreak of the Second Great War. He expressed his sorrow in his *Crisis of Civilization* which was written shortly before his death. In it he had praised Britain for having 'given shelter to war refugees. He praised the Soviet Union for her remarkable achievement of industrialization and abolition of illiteracy

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and poverty. But on the whole he felt that light was going out of Europe. That Europe had prepared for this crisis for centuries and at last it had come.

After this crisis, human civilization would no doubt rise again. But this time its leaders would be the people of the East with their ideals of spiritualism. He, however, did not live to see the decline of Western imperialism from countries of Asia and Africa and the humanitarian approach of some of them towards countries which they had ruled and exploited.

Tagore, to sum up, tried to base his political philosophy on the foundation of social and moral traditions of this country. He was aware of their shortcomings but he believed that since they were suited to our genius, they must not be given up. His political philosophy helped us to raise our morale during the grim days of our freedom struggle. It also helped us to restore the vanishing moral dimension in our political values.

**Conclusion:**

Rabindranath Tagore's political philosophy occupies a distinctive place in modern thought. Although he was not a systematic political theorist, his ideas express a profound moral and spiritual concern for humanity that transcends the limits of politics in the conventional sense. For Tagore, politics should never be separated from ethics and spirituality. He regarded excessive nationalism and materialism as the major threats to civilization, warning that blind political passions and economic greed destroy the inner harmony of human life.

Tagore's vision of society was rooted in human freedom and moral development. He emphasized that the *state* represents coercion and organization, while *society* embodies voluntary cooperation and creative fellowship. Thus, he believed the true progress of civilization depends not on state power but on the moral and cultural vitality of the people. His political thought, therefore, was not about domination or competition but about the flowering of human personality in freedom and creativity.

At the heart of Tagore's political philosophy lies universal humanism. He advocated a world where people of all nations and races could live in harmony, united by the spiritual bond of love and mutual respect. He sought a synthesis between the spiritual wisdom of the

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East and the scientific rationalism of the West, believing that the future of humanity depends on the union of these two streams of civilization.

Tagore's vision of politics was essentially ethical and spiritual—a call for the moralization of political life and the recognition of the divine potential in every human being. His message of universal peace, cooperation, and creative unity continues to resonate today, reminding us that true civilization is not built on power or wealth but on truth, beauty, and love—the eternal values that nurture the soul of humanity.

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