From "Critical" Nationalism to "Asia as Method": Tagore's Quest for a Moral Imaginary' and Its Implications for Post-Western International Relations

Giorgio Shani [iD]

International Christian University, Japan
London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

This article seeks to contribute to the development of post-western international relations (IR) by engaging with the political writings and complex legacy of the Bengali Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). It will show how Tagore's critique of the "nation," most presciently delivered in a lecture delivered in Japan as the First World War unfolded, unlocks the potential of "Asia as method."

Tagore was an anti-imperialist but cannot be described as a nationalist since he was "critical" of the ideology of nationalism which he considered to be both pernicious and alien to "Asian" societies. His attempt to transcend the imaginary of the nation-state led him to posit "Asia" as a "moral imaginary" to counter the Westphalian imaginary of IR. However, this imaginary, based to a large extent on Orientalist readings of Asian history and civilization, was co-opted by the main object of his critique: the nation-state. It subsequently was subordinated to, and helped legitimize, Japanese imperial ambitions. Rather than seeing Tagore's flawed imaginary as merely highlighting the "deadlocks" of post-western IR theory, I argue that it can be seen as unlocking its "potential" by positing Asia as an "imaginary anchoring point" with which to critique the Westphalian imaginary, and methodological nationalism, of IR.

Le présent article se propose de contribuer au développement des relations internationales (RI) post-occidentales en s'intéressant aux écrits politiques et à l'héritage complexe du prix Nobel bengali, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). L'article montrera comment la critique de M. Tagore de la « nation », présentée de façon presciente lors d'un discours au Japon au milieu de la Première Guerre mondiale, déverrouille le potentiel de « l'Asie comme méthode ». M. Tagore était un anti-impérialiste, mais ne peut être qualifié de nationaliste, car il se montrait « critique » de l'idéologie du nationalisme, qu'il considérait à la fois pernicieuse et étrangère aux sociétés « asiatiques ». Sa tentative de transcendance de l'imaginaire de l'État-nation l'a conduit à postuler « l'Asie » comme un « imaginaire moral », par opposition à l'imaginaire westphalien des RI. Cependant, cet imaginaire, largement basé sur les lectures orientalistes de l'histoire et la civilisation asiatiques , a été récupéré par l'objet principal de sa critique : l'État-nation. Il a par la suite été subordonné aux ambitions impériales du Japon, qu'il a contribué à légitimer. Plutôt que de considérer l'imaginaire imparfait de M. Tagore simplement comme une mise en lumière des « impasses » de la théorie des RI post-occidentales, je propose de démontrer qu'on peut estimer qu'il déverrouille son « potentiel », en postulant l'Asie comme un « point d'ancrage imaginaire », grâce auquel il est possible de critiquer l'imaginaire westphalien, et le nationalisme méthodologique, des RI.

Este artículo pretende contribuir al desarrollo de las Relaciones Internacionales (RRII) postoccidentales a partir de los escritos políticos y el complejo legado del premio Nobel bengalí Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). Se mostrará cómo la crítica de Tagore de la «nación», pronunciada de forma muy presciente en una conferencia realizada en Japón mientras transcurría la Primera Guerra Mundial, desvela el potencial de «Asia como método». Tagore era un antiimperialista, pero no puede calificarse de nacionalista, puesto que era «crítico» respecto a la ideología del nacionalismo, que consideraba perniciosa y ajena a las sociedades «asiáticas». Su intento de trascender el imaginario del Estado nación le llevó a plantear «Asia» como un «imaginario moral» para contrarrestar el imaginario westfaliano de las RRII. Sin embargo, este imaginario, basado en gran medida en las lecturas orientalistas de la historia y la civilización asiáticas, fue asimilado por el principal objeto de su crítica: el Estado nación. En consecuencia, este imaginario se subordinó a las ambiciones imperiales japonesas y contribuyó a legitimarlas. En lugar de considerar que el imaginario defectuoso de Tagore se limita a poner de manifiesto los «puntos muertos» de la teoría postoccidental de las RRII, sostenemos que puede considerarse que desbloquea su «potencial» al plantear a Asia como un «punto de anclaje imaginario» con el que criticar el imaginario westfaliano, y el nacionalismo metodológico, de las RRII

Introduction

In a lecture given in Japan as the First World War unfolded, the Bengali Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) criticized the nation-state and the materialist philosophy underpinning it and offered instead a vision of an Asia suffused with indigenous spiritual values. "The political civilization which has sprung from the soil of Europe and is overrunning the whole world," Tagore presciently asserted, "is based on exclusiveness" ([Tagore 1991](), 24). Nationalism—or "national patriotism" —was the name he gave to that political civilization. It was based on "science" and not "human" values, unlike "Eastern" civilizations that were based on "the spiritual idea of man" ([Tagore 1991](), 25).

This article critically examines the difficulties of transcending the violence embedded in the nation-state with

reference to Tagore's work. Tagore's "critical" stance toward nationalism was based on unease with the homogeneity demanded of the nation, the requirement that all nations correspond with an ideal form of political community developed in Europe, and its subordination to the state, an apparatus of control based on violence. In making sovereignty the center of all political activity and collective aspirations, the nation-state reproduced the political *imaginary* of colonialism. The term, "imaginary" refers to the set of values, institutions, laws and symbols through which people imagine their social whole. Tagore, it has been argued, turned the nation into a "moral imaginary," which could be used strategically as a ground to criticize nation-states (Kaviraj 2019).

By "moral imaginary," Kaviraj has in mind an ideal form of human belonging which can be used to critique and evaluate existing forms of political community (Kaviraj 2019, 26). He draws explicitly on the work of Charles Taylor and in particular his understanding of modern "moral orders" and "social imaginaries" (Taylor 2004). A "moral order" refers, in a classical sense, to the "rights and obligations we have as individuals in regard to each other, even prior to or outside the political bond" (Taylor 2004, 4). This conception of moral order has, according to Taylor, undergone a double expansion with the transition to "modernity" in both extension (more people live by it) and in intensity (the demands it makes are heavier). Modern "moral orders" are *immanent*: they are, in Taylor's words, for the "here and now" (Taylor 2004, 7) and do not carry with them expectations of its "integral fulfilment" (Taylor 2004, 6); in contrast, a moral order is something to strive for and, in so doing, permeates the imagination of "the people" to form a "social imaginary." Taylor's use of the term "imaginary" implicitly draws on Benedict Anderson's (1991) understanding of the "nation" as an "imagined community" and it is in his capacity to imagine alternative forms of political community than the nation that Tagore's contribution to international relations (IR) lies.

However, Tagore's quest for moral imaginaries was not limited to the nation: his desire to transcend the nation-state and the violence embedded within it led him to formulate an embryonic Pan-Asianism with Japanese thinker Okakura Tenshin, which ultimately became subordinated to Japanese Imperial ambitions (Duara 2001; Mishra 2012). This points to an important question in "post-western IR": whether attempts to transcend the Westphalian imaginary inadvertently reproduce Eurocentrism (Tolay 2021). As Hobson (2012) has pointed out, Eurocentrism is a polymorphous, multivalent discourse that crystallizes in a variety of forms. It can take the form of an international order based on the norms and conventions of a European international society, namely territorialized sovereignty and the nation-state, *and* also attempts to transcend it with reference to essentialized conceptions of cultural and religious difference viewed from a European perspective.[1] In critiquing the Eurocentrism of the international order, pan-Asianism relied on Orientalist constructions of "Asia" and, thus, of Eurocentric modes of thought. This tension has led some postcolonial scholars to argue that a "geo-culturally pluralist IR" runs the risk of reifying "nativist forms of cultural essentialism" (Krishna 2021). This can certainly be seen in Tagore's attempt, in conversation with Okakura Tenshin, to formulate

a pan-Asian community based on essentialized representations of Asian "spiritual" traditions. They constructed an "Asia" that was the "other" of the West through Orientalist tropes[2]: The Asia they imagined did not exist outside of Western representations of it. That is not to claim, however, that the cultural and religious traditions upon which their "Asia" was based were imaginary. Indeed, the Buddhist, Confucian, and Dharmic traditions they referenced predated the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions. However, the *unity* they ascribed to these traditions and the essentialized difference with *the* West (rather than "multiple Wests"[3]) were based on Orientalist readings.

Viewed as a "moral imaginary," on the other hand, Tagore's Asia at least can also be seen as an expression of "post-colonial agency" (Hobson and Sajed 2017). With the coming of colonial modernity, the term "Asian" was used to categorize that which was different from the "West"; there were "objects designated as Asians" but until Tagore and Okakura, "there were no subjects who represented themselves by calling themselves Asian" (Sakai 2006, 168). It is in their work that we can locate the "potential" of "Asia as Method": using Asia as "an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other's points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt" (Chen 2010, 212).

Using "Asia as method" entails "provincializing Europe" (Chakrabarty 2000)[4] as the main reference point for understanding IR so that the experiences of the West, and, in particular, the transition to a singular conception of "modernity," are limited only to one part of the globe. It permits comparisons to be drawn directly between "Asian" societies without referring to the hegemonic conception of the "West" and its linear stages of development which seek to categorize and order other regions according to *its* criteria and values. In doing so, it *de-links* "modernity" from the West and opens the possibility of multiple conceptions of modernity or *multiple modernities* (Eisenstadt 2000, 2).[5] This is not to claim that "the West" is not present in the very category of "Asia" but that, by engaging with other "Asian" societies, it becomes less central to the way in which "Asian" societies understand themselves. From an Orientalist construction, the category of "Asia" becomes a collective *subjectivity* ("we Asians"), a way of speaking back to the West and provincializing its own understanding of modernity. However, as Chen Kuan-Hsing counsels, "Asia as method" necessitates keeping a "critical distance from uninterrogated notions of Asia, just as one has to maintain a critical distance from uninterrogated notions of the nation-state. It sees Asia as a

---

[1] I use "Europe," here, interchangeably with the "West" since Tagore wrote during a period in which European Empires still controlled much of the world fully cognizant that, in the post Second World War *Pax-Americana*, Europe can be viewed as potentially challenging American hegemony. As Fisher and Nicolaïdis note (2013, 284) "some forms of Eurocentrism patently challenge American-centrism." I would, not go so far as to claim, as they do, that Europe can be seen as a "post-colonial power" given the *racialization* of discourses of European-ness in the wake of the global refugee crisis of 2014–15.

[2] In his seminal book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said mapped out the array of disciplinary strategies and representational practices whereby colonial powers were able to manage and even "produce" the "Orient" as distinct from the West. He followed Michel Foucault in regarding knowledge as intimately connected with power. Said argued that "Orientalism" was a *discourse*—that is a set of statements that construct rather than represent "reality" reflected in academic disciplines including IR—through which the Orient was constituted in order to facilitate its control. There was, for Said, no "real" Orient outside of its representation in western texts written about the Orient. Through these texts, the Orientalist, Said argued, "makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West." (Said 1978, 20–21).

[3] I use the term "multiple Wests" below referring to the work of Ashis Nandy (1983) below in the section "Asia as Method." I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that I reference it earlier in order to avoid claims of essentialism.

[4] Provincialize, here, refers to the simultaneous indispensability and inadequacy of categories and concepts that have their origins in Europe to the study of the "various life practices that constitute the political and the historical" in other cultures and societies (Chakrabarty 2000, 6). For applications to IR, see Shani (2007) and Shani and Behera (2021).

[5] As Eisenstadt (2000, 2) puts it, "the best way to understand the contemporary world indeed to explain the history of modernity is to see it as a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs."

product of history, and realizes that Asia has been an active participant in historical processes" (Chen 2010, 215).

The Argument

This article will attempt to show how Tagore's critique of the nation which remains fundamental to the Westphalian imaginary of IR makes "Asia as method" possible. Tagore, I argue, was an anti-imperialist but cannot be described as a nationalist since he was, following Kaviraj, "critical" of the ideology of nationalism which he considered to be both pernicious and alien to "Asian" societies. His attempt to transcend the imaginary of the nation-state led him to posit Asia as a "moral imaginary" to counter the Westphalian imaginary of IR. However, this imaginary was co-opted by the main object of his critique: the nation-state. Nevertheless, I argue that Tagore's unsuccessful attempt to transcend the Westphalian imaginary of IR points not only to the "deadlocks," but also to the "prospects" of post-western IR theory (Vasilaki 2012). It did so by introducing Asia as an "imaginary anchoring point" so that societies in Asia could eventually become "each other's points of reference" rather than referring to a hegemonic West.

Tagore's attempt to critically interrogate the nation-state by positing a unified Asia as a "moral imaginary" may be seen as an important resource for the development of a "post-western" IR in two ways. First, Tagore sought to transcend the Westphalian imaginary of territorialized sovereignty to which anti-colonial nationalism aspired. As Partha Chatterjee (1985) insightfully argued, nationalism in the colonial world can be seen as a "derivative discourse" of Western modernity in two ways. First, it seeks to articulate geo-cultural *difference* using a conceptual vocabulary derived from Western historical experience and political thought, that of the "nation" and "nationalism." Second, it seeks to mobilize the "nation" in order to capture state power. However, for Chatterjee, influenced by his Bengali forefather Tagore, the nation encompasses a spiritual, sacred dimension which was not accessible to the colonizer. Western modernist theories of nationalism conflate the spiritual domain of the "nation" with the outer domain of the "state." The nation may be an "imagined community" to use Anderson's famous formulation[6], but the *way* in which the nation was imagined differed outside of the West. As Chatterjee (1993, 5) put it, "if nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain "modular" forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine?" However, Chatterjee is unwilling to countenance *other* forms of "imagined community" preferring to focus exclusively on the nation-state and on India in particular.

Tagore, on the other hand, goes beyond the nation-state by conceiving of "Asia" as a new form of "imagined community." In doing so, he opens up the possibility of *de-nationalizing* the spiritual dimension of the "nation" and bringing the various "spiritual" traditions of Asia in conversation with each other. This constitutes Tagore's second contribution to the development of a post-western IR: he

goes beyond dominant Western framings of the international through an engagement with different *cosmological* traditions.[7] This "post-western" vision can be contrasted with a "non-western" IR based on "national schools" that reproduce the dominant narrative of Westphalian IR.[8] Post-Western IR, in my understanding,[9] encompasses both postcolonial[10] and decolonial[11] accounts of IR but seeks to go beyond critique of the constitutive role which colonialism played in the formation of "modernity" and the "international." It also questions the "pluralistic universality" upon which Global IR[12] is based preferring a *pluriversal* framework based on an entanglement of cosmologies.[13] Pluriversality here refers to the co-existence of multiple and interlocking conceptions of universality rather than a single conception of universality.[14] In other words, we live in a "world of many worlds" each with their own conception of universality (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018). As a "moral imaginary," Tagore's Asia may be seen as a site of inter-cosmological dialogue[15] where these different worlds meet rather than a coherent geo-cultural entity. Implicitly, for Tagore, Asia is to use Chen's terms, a "method," whereby different cosmological traditions can learn to converse with another without referring to the West, thus "provincializing" it (Chakrabarty 2000). However, they continue to do so by using conceptual categories derived from the West opening up the possibility of the co-option of "Asia" by "non" western imperial imaginaries.

The article will be structured as follows: The first section will outline Tagore's literary representation of "nation" with reference to his lectures on *Nationalism* (Tagore 1991) and his novels, *Home and the World* [*Ghare Baire*], *Four Chapters* [*Char Adhyay*], and *Gora*. It will be argued, following Kaviraj, that Tagore posits the nation as a "moral imaginary" but, like Gandhi, makes a distinction between nation and state, thus challenging the Eurocentric conception of the nation-state. The second section will attempt to apply the concept of "moral imaginary" to his understanding of Asia, formulated in conversation with the Japanese intellectual, Okakura Tenshin, as elucidated in his lectures on nationalism delivered in his visit to Japan. We will then show how this "moral imaginary" was co-opted by the Japanese nation-state and became an "imperial imaginary" in the inter-war period in the next section. After Japan's defeat in the Second World War, Pan-Asianism was largely discredited, but, as the penultimate section will illustrate, Tagore's legacy can be found

---

[6]For Anderson, the nation is "imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" and it "imagined as a community because, the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 1991, 6–7). His influential theory of nationalism focuses on the key role played by "print-capitalism" in the construction of nations on the basis of vernacular languages. He locates the origins of this process in Europe with the translation of the Bible and sees nationalism as disseminating from the West, through "creole elites" in colonial societies, to the rest of the world.

[7]A cosmology here refers to sets of *normative* epistemological and ontological claims about the origins of the cosmos and our place in it. See Blaney and Tickner (2017, 5) and Behr and Shani (2021). It is used here in a wider sense to encompass not only "secular" scientific cosmologies (see Allan 2019 and Kurki 2020), but also "religious" and "cultural" cosmologies (see Shani and Behera 2021).

[8]The most influential "national" school is that of the People's Republic of China (PRC). It has spawned other "national schools" including Republic of Korea and India. For a critical genealogy of these respective "national" schools, see Hwang (2021), Seo and Cho (2021), and Behera (2007).

[9]See Shani (2008), Behr and Shani (2021), and Shani and Behera (2021).

[10]Postcolonial accounts of IR are too numerous to cite here. For an accessible introduction to post-colonial IR, see Seth (2013).

[11]Decolonial approaches draw upon insights from the modernity/coloniality/decoloniality research project initiated primarily by Latin American scholars. See Mignolo and Escobar (2010). In recent years, their approach has become popularized in IR by Blaney and Tickner (2017), Shilliam (2015), Rojas (2016), and Hutchings (2019) among others.

[12]For Acharya (2014, 647), "Global IR. . .transcends the divide between the West and the Rest" by committing "to pluralistic universalism, grounding in world history, redefining existing IR theories and methods and building new ones from societies hitherto ignored as sources of IR knowledge."

[13]See Trownsell, Behera, and Shani (2022).

[14]See Mignolo and Escobar (2010).

[15]See Behr and Shani (2021).

in attempts by contemporary intellectuals in the region inspired by post-colonial thought to use "Asia" as a reference point in order to provincialize the West: "Asia as method." Finally, the article will conclude by suggesting ways in which an engagement with Tagore can help unlock the potential of, as well as illustrate the tensions within, post-western IR.

Tagore on the "Nation"

Born into an upper caste *zamindari*[16] family which had benefitted materially from British rule, Rabindranath Tagore was an unlikely advocate of anti-colonial nationalism and had a deeply ambivalent relationship to the concept of the "nation." For Kaviraj, his "peculiarity" lay in his ability to "observe critically the strange impulses that emerged from . . .nationalist sentiment," and to provide a critique of both anti-colonial and imperialist nationalism (Kaviraj 2019, 13). The 1905 Partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon had radicalized Tagore and a whole generation of younger Bengali "nationalists" who revisited not only the classic works of European nationalism, such as Giuseppe Mazzini, but also the religiously infused proto-Bengali nationalism of Bankinchandra Chattopadhyay. This class of *badhralok*, whose political awakening had been shaped by Rajmohan Roy's *Brahmo Samaj*, was to become the subjects of his novels and targets of his satirical polemics. Fiction provided Tagore with an avenue to explore the pitfalls of anti-colonial nationalism as a modern political *movement* without compromising his support for the *ideal* of anti-colonial nationalism. His novels were "his revenge on reality" since they freed him to create characters and situations that would reveal the "logic of disaster which outer social reality did not show with remorseless clarity" (Kaviraj 2019, 17).

Two of his novels in particular explore the "logic of disaster" of modern political mobilization: *Home and the World* [*Ghare Baire* (Tagore 1992)] and *Four Chapters* [*Char Adhyay* (Tagore 2003)]. In *Home and the World,* the main protagonist, Sandip, is a charismatic and committed nationalist who sacrifices first his friendship, then his lover, and finally the very ideal for which he is fighting for political gain. The novel charts the degradation of Sandip as he enters modern politics and applies its instrumental logic to those closest to him. His friendship with his closest friend unravels when he seduces his wife whom he proceeds to manipulate and then abandon for political ends. Finally, in a prescient foretelling of the tragedy of Partition, the ideal for which he is committed, anti-colonial nationalism, burns to "ashes in the fire of communal strife" between Hindus and Muslims, which he himself instigates (Kaviraj 2019, 18). *Char Adhyay*, on the other hand, portrays the life in four chapters of an idealistic nationalist, Atin, who becomes embroiled in anti-colonial terrorism and chronicles his descent into a vortex of violence with his girlfriend who he is eventually asked to execute at the behest of Indranath, the leader of the cell both are part of. Like Sandip in *Ghare Baire*, Indranath exhibits what Ashis Nandy termed in his commentary on the novel a "dispassionate, fully scientific, ruthless commit-

ment to what can only be termed instrumental rationality" (Nandy 1994, 22). It was this rationality, and not the cause of anti-colonial nationalism itself, which Tagore sought to critique and considered, in Nandy's words, "illegitimate."

For Sudipta Kaviraj, Tagore developed a conception of nationalism which was critical of itself: a "critical nationalism" (Kaviraj 2019, 20).[17] He conceived of the "nation" not as an actual existing historical form nor as a "project" which could only be accomplished with the achievement of statehood but as a "moral imaginary": "an ideal of human belonging which no state can historically realize in full, and which, therefore, can be used strategically as a ground from which actual states and their always imperfect realization of the people-nation can be criticized" (Kaviraj 2019, 26). Certainly, Tagore upheld the importance of morality in his depiction of "man's world" as a "moral world." Morality, for Tagore, was indivisible as in the Indic notion of *dharma* as "cosmic order": the "moral nature of man cannot be divided into convenient compartments for its preservation" (Tagore 1991, 67). For Tagore, it was impossible to separate *dharma* into different "compartments" such as rationality (or statecraft) and morality since *dharmic* cosmology views the cosmos holistically as comprising relations between humans, gods, spirits, and the other sentient beings.[18]

His major concern with contemporary iterations of nationalism was with the homogeneity demanded and celebrated by the ideal of the European nation-state. This can clearly be seen in his acclaimed novel *Gora* which tells the story of an infant raised by a Bengali Hindu mother who grows up to be a nationalist before discovering that he is the abandoned son of an Irish soldier. In the novel, Tagore appeared to be suggesting that the nation could not be grounded in ethnicity but needed to be wide enough to include even the offspring of the former colonizer. The main problem with colonialism, Tagore surmised, was not subjection to alien rule but subjection to "the modern social imaginary which made sovereignty the centre of all political attention and collective activity" (Kaviraj 2019, 20). After all, India had been ruled by—and was comprised of— "others" from the ancient Greeks and the Persians to the Mughals since "her thrones were not her concern" yet she now found herself ruled by "an abstract being," the Nation, and governed as impersonally as "some brand of tinned food" (Tagore 1991, 50). The nation, for Tagore, was "that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose" (Tagore 1991, 51). The difference between the two forms of rule was "like the difference between the hand-loom and the power-loom." While in the former "the magic of man's living fingers finds its expression," the latter is "relentlessly lifeless and accurate and monotonous in its production" (Tagore 1991, 57). In other words, Tagore saw in nationalism a desire for homogeneity which distinguished it from other forms of rule, including forms of imperial rule prior to the coming of the British. Whereas India's former Muslim rulers had been content to allow their subjects to keep their own religious

---

[16] *Zamindars* were feudal landlords who collected land revenue for the government during Mughal times. During the period of British rule, *Zamindars* paid the *Raj* a fixed revenue and were given the right to collect taxes from agricultural classes even in times of poor yield. Consequently, many *Zamindars* acquired the land which they taxed for the *Raj a*nd wielded enormous power as intermediaries between the British and the rural masses. Following independence, the Indian government under Jawaharlal Nehru sought to curtail the power of *Zamindars* by abolishing the system and redistributing land to the peasantry. Tagore was born into one of the most prominent *Zamindari* families in Bengal, but the fortunes of the *Zamindars* declined during his lifetime. See Panda (1996).

[17] Despite similarities, "critical" nationalism in Kaviraj's sense can be distinguished from liberal or civic nationalism in the West since it is critical of the perceived violence inherent in the nation-state itself and not the system of government. This distinction is important as India developed liberal-democratic institutions after independence, yet the coercive character of the post-colonial state was clear in how it dealt with challenges to its central authority by militant and ethno-religious movements. See Kaviraj (2010) for an overview of the post-colonial Indian state and Singh and Shani (2021) for an example of how the state dealt with challenges from ethno-religious minorities.

[18] For an exploration of the cosmology of *dharma a*nd its implications for IR, see Shani and Behera (2021).

traditions and local caste hierarchies upon payment of a *jizya* (religious tax), under British rule these localized differences were reified through the categories of "religion" and "caste" and enumerated through the Census on a national (All-India) level.[19] The emerging "secular" anti-colonial nationalism of the Indian National Congress (INC) sought to abolish these categories in order to create a homogeneous body of citizens. In doing so, they also eradicated localized differences that existed prior to the coming of the British.

Although a supporter of anti-colonial nationalism, Tagore, like Mohandas Gandhi whose world-view he shaped, was critical of the violence embedded in the modern forms of political and social organization which had developed in the West.[20] In particular, they were both critical of the nation-state as an apparatus of control and nationalism as an ideology of political mobilization: "their similarity lay in the fact that both thought similarly regarding the *logic* of the modern state, and techniques of modern power" (Kaviraj 2019, 20). Indeed, Nandy (1994) considers them both not to be "nationalists" but "patriots."[21] However, as Kaviraj (2019, 23) points out, this description appears to conflate the *nation* with the s*tate.* Nandy appears to accept the Eurocentric modernist understanding of nationalism as a feeling of collective belonging that is centered on a state. This is most clearly stated in the Weberian definition of "a nation as a community of sentiment which would adequately manifest itself in a state of its own" (Weber 1991, 117).[22] Both Tagore and Gandhi identified with the "imagined community" of India and so, in that sense, can be considered "nationalists," yet they both rejected the argument that independence from colonial rule necessitated *statehood.*

Their similarities in their critique of colonial modernity, however, mask differences in their approach to nationalism which may in part be attributed to their chosen career paths. Tagore, the great poet, did not share Gandhi's intimate understanding of both the state machinery which he attempted to wrest from the British nor his ability to mobilize the masses against colonial rule. He also did not share Gandhi's political ambitions. Gandhi, in turn, did not share the gift of the man he endearingly called the "great sentinel" for literature and poetry. While Rabrindranath Tagore became the first Asian to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, Gandhi emigrated to South Africa after qualifying for the bar in London. The outbreak of the First World War soon after provoked different reactions in both men. Tagore abhorred the loss of life in this imperialist war and saw it as evidence of the impending demise not only of imperialism, but also of Western "civilization," the concept which years later

Gandhi dryly called into question in a visit to the "satanic mills" of Lancashire. Gandhi, on the other hand, saw the war as an opportunity to further the interests of Indian migrants in South Africa by proving their loyalty to the empire. The man who would become the world's most famous advocate of non-violent cooperation with colonialism thus set about recruiting Indian soldiers to serve in an imperial war.

Asia as a "moral imaginary"

Tagore's ambivalence and deeply contradictory feelings toward nationalism as a concept is most clearly conveyed in the series of lectures he delivered during the war and particularly in Japan where he was initially greeted with adulation and feted as Asia's Nobel Laureate. The impulse for the invitation was an emerging *pan-Asian* (*Ajia shugi*) consciousness which contrasted the parochialism of Europe's civil war and which saw Tokyo become a hub of anti-imperial nationalist activity. However, while Indian anti-colonial nationalists such as Rash Behari Bose (1886–1945) made Japan their home, Japan was busy assembling her own Asian Empire, annexing Korea in 1910 and subjecting its new imperial subjects to a brutal occupation. In the emerging Japanese imperial imaginary, Japan seemingly had a "right" to lead Asia since she had been the first to modernize and, paradoxically, to have "left Asia" as expressed in famous dictum of the Meiji reformer Yukichi Fukuzawa (1835–1901): *Datsu-A.* By the outbreak of the First World War, Japan was preparing to return to Asia. Ideas of a *Ko-A* or "Raising (or Developing) Asia," were popularized by Tagore's friend, Okakura Tenshin (1862–1913), in his work *The Ideals of the East* (1903). Although Okakura was dead by the time Tagore arrived in Japan, his presence was keenly felt, but not publicly acknowledged, by his great friend who had hosted him in his visit to India (Bharucha 2006). His lecture on Nationalism in Japan, therefore, may be seen retrospectively as a *dialogue* between the two men on the perils of nationalism and possibility of pan-Asianism. Tagore, in choosing not to publicly acknowledge his friend, freed himself from the moral obligation of having to defer to his ideas and consequently was able to critically engage with his articulation of "Asia" in a none too veiled slight to his hosts.

In a book written during his sojourn at Tagore's home Okakura conceived of Asia as less a geographic than a metaphysical and spiritual realm, transcending the distinct regions and civilizations that it comprised. "Asia is one," he wrote:

> The Himalayas divide, only to accentuate, two mighty civilisations, the Chinese with its communism of Confucius, and the Indian with its individualism of the Vedas. But not even the snowy barriers can interrupt for one moment that broad expanse of love for the Ultimate and Universal, which is the common thought-inheritance of every Asiatic race, enabling them to produce all the great religions of the world, and distinguishing them from those maritime peoples of the Mediterranean and the Baltic, who love to dwell on the particular, and to search out the means, not the end, of life. (Okakura 1903, 1)

However, this conception of Asia owed much to Orientalist discourse which depicted Asia as the "Other" of the West. Asia was a term invented by Europeans to "distinguish Europe from its eastern others" (Sakai 2006, 169). For Sakai, "Asia was necessary for Europe because, without positing it, Europe could not have been marked as a distinct and distinguishable unity" (Sakai 2006, 169). The term

---

[19] The introduction of the Censuses transformed previously "fuzzy" into "enumerated" communities (Kaviraj 2010). As Bernard Cohn points out, "what was entailed in the construction of census operations was the creation of social categories by which India was ordered for administrative purposes" (Cohn 1996, 8). See Pandey (1990) and Dirks (2001) for classic accounts of how colonialism contributed to the construction of politicized religious and caste identities in India.

[20] Indeed, Maia Ramnath (2011) has gone as far as to claim both Tagore and Gandhi to be "anarchists" in their normative rejection of the nation-state, my thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this interesting resource.

[21] Ananya Vajpeyi (2012, 96) questions whether Tagore can be considered a "patriot" since he did "not work with territorial, geopolitical, cartographic, and exclusionary conceptions of space in indicating either Bengal or India." Indeed, posthumously, his compositions were used as national anthems in both India and Bangladesh.

[22] Weber's classic definition of the nation-state, in turn, was influenced by Hegel's formulation of the nation as state in his *Philosophy of Right*: "The nation-state is mind in its substantive rationality and immediate actuality and is therefore the absolute power on earth. It follows that every state is sovereign and autonomous against its neighbours" (Hegel [1820] 1967, § 331), my thanks to an anonymous reviewer for reminding me of Hegel's influence on modern conceptions of nationalism.

purportedly originates in ancient Greece in the fifth century BCE to refer to its eastern neighbors. It was only with European colonial expansionism in the nineteenth century that Asia came to represent "a specific geopolitical space bound together by such commonalities as a shared history, close cultural links, long record of diplomatic relations, trade exchanges, and the notion of a 'common destiny'" (Saaler and Szpilman 2011, 2).

Tagore appears to buy into this Orientalist depiction of Asia throughout his lecture on nationalism in Japan contrasting a spiritual, unchanging Orient with a modern, rational, materialistic West.[23] The West, for Tagore, has given birth to "a political civilization" which is "scientific" and "carnivorous and cannibalistic in its tendencies" feeding "upon the resources of other peoples" while attempting "to swallow their own future" (Tagore 1991, 24). In contrast, Asia "is evolving its own civilization" which is "not political but social, not predatory and mechanically efficient but spiritual and based upon all the varied and deeper relations of humanity" (Tagore 1991, 29). Its civilizational ethos is based on "society and the spiritual ideal of Man" (Tagore 1991, 24–25). When the "conflagration" unleashed by the West "consumes itself and dies down," Tagore wrote, the "eternal light will again shine in the East . . . which has been the morning sun of man's history" (Tagore 1991, 45).

However, Tagore's "Asia" was not a civilization—or a set of civilizations—distinct from the West but a "moral imaginary": a ground from which to critique the West as well as Asian nation-states such as Japan and the India which was to emerge from Partition. The West was critiqued for having abandoned her Christian heritage and embraced "heartless commerce." It is Asia as a moral imaginary which permits Tagore to describe Europe as "supremely good in her beneficence where her face is turned to all of humanity; and . . .supremely evil in her maleficent aspect where her power is turned only upon her interest, using all her power of greatness for ends which are against the infinite and eternal in Man" (Tagore 1991, 29). Western nations, Tagore counsels, are "following that path of suicide where they are smothering their humanity under the immense weight of organisations in order to keep themselves in power and hold others in subjection." And it is in Asia's voice that he warns the West that "the hurts they inflict upon other races" will infect them. (Tagore 1991, 36–37). However, Asia as a "moral imaginary" was also the ground with which to castigate Asian civilizations, including his own, for insulting "humanity by treating with utter disdain and cruelty men who belonged to a particular creed, colour or caste" (Tagore 1991, 42).

As a moral imaginary, Asia could not be "led" by a nation-state or subordinated to its imperial ambitions. Tagore was acutely aware of this possibility and chose to inject a notion of caution in his overly flowery depiction of a timeless, homogenous Japanese civilization marked by its inalienable *difference* from the West which would have made even Okakura blush. He lavishes praise on Japan "the child of the Ancient East" for "fearlessly" claiming "all the gifts of the modern age for herself" (Tagore 1991, 20) and appears to be dangerously close, in an echo of Okakura, to endorsing her right to lead Asia:

> Of all the countries in Asia, here in Japan you have the freedom to use the materials you have gathered from the West according to your genius and your need. Therefore your responsibility is all the greater, for in your voice Asia shall answer the questions that

Europe has submitted to the conference of Man. (Tagore 1991, 23)

Yet he warns his hosts that if Japan were to "imitate" the West "the great expectation she has raised will remain unfulfilled" (Tagore 1991, 21). He likened imitation to "dressing our skeleton in another man's skin" (Tagore 1991, 20). What was "dangerous for Japan" was not, in Tagore's view "the imitation of the outer features of the West but the motive force of Western nationalism as her own" (Tagore 1991, 36). Tagore expands his critique of the Nation to engage with his experience in Japan during his subsequent visit to the United States in October 1916 where he was invited to give a lecture in San Francisco. Attributing the "voluntary submission of the whole people to the trimming of their minds and clipping of their freedom by the government" to "their nervous desire to turn themselves into a machine of power, called the Nation, and emulate other machines in their collective worldliness," he exhorts them to "take its stand upon the higher ideals of humanity and never to follow the West in its acceptance of the organized selfishness of Nationalism as its religion" (Tagore 1991, 62–63.) For this "religion" of nationalism would lead inevitably to war as seen in the "European war of nations" which he sees as "the war of retribution." In the midst of the First World War, "the time has come when, for the sake of the whole outraged world, Europe should finally know in her own person the terrible absurdity of the thing called the Nation" (Tagore 1991, 74).

Pan-Asianism as an Imperialist Imaginary

The First World War, however, did not bring about the end of "the Nation" but lay the foundations of its universalization through the League of Nations. This section will account for how the very coloniality built into the emerging post-World War I international architecture lent itself to the instrumentalization of Tagore's "moral imaginary" by Japan. Before the establishment of the League, non-western states could be admitted into a European-dominated "international society only once they met the 'standards of civilization" (Gong 1984) necessary for inclusion, standards that included the possession of colonial territories as in the case of Ottoman Turkey, Tsarist Russia, and Imperial Japan. However, its establishment appeared to lay the foundations of a more *international* society through the idea of national self-determination: the idea that a "people" had a "right" to determine their own destiny through sovereign statehood. Consisting mainly of, and dominated by, European Empires, the League embraced the goal of national self-determination as specified in Woodrow Wilson's (in)famous fourteen points and institutionalized in the Peace of Versailles. National self-determination, however, remained confined to Europe and was not applied to the multi-national European Empires that swallowed up the remnants of the Ottoman Empire through the concession of mandated territories. The global "colour line" (du Bois 1903) was impossible to ignore. Japan, as the only Asian power to have defeated a "Western" Empire (as Tsarist Russia was considered) sought to table a motion, drafted by the League for the Equality of the Races, calling for the abolition of racial discrimination, but this was rejected by the predominantly White powers, many of which had recently imposed restrictions against Asian migrants. Although the proposal was not accepted, it cemented Japan's status as a champion of the colonized and attracted the admiration of a wide range of anti-colonial thinkers throughout Asia who Japan cultivated through forums such as the *Ajia Gikai*,

---

[23] See footnote 3 for a summary of Said's seminal account of Orientalism (Said 1978).

founded by Japanese and Muslim Pan-Asianists in 1909, and the *Dai Ajia Kyokai* (the Greater Asia Association) in 1933,[24] which were successors to the *KoA-kai* (established 1880) and *Ajia Kyokai* (established 1883) in the Meiji era.

One of the most prominent of these anti-colonial thinkers was another Bengali Rash Behari Bose (1886–1945). Bose fled to Japan following his alleged involvement in a failed plot to assassinate the viceroy of India in 1912 by feigning a family relationship with Tagore. In Japan, he received support from powerful Japanese "ultra-nationalists" such as Toyama Mitsuru (1855–1944), the founder of the *Genyosha* (Black Ocean Society), and as time went by, his anti-colonial nationalism "grew more entangled with the rise of the ultranationalistic version of Pan-Asianism advocated by Toyama and his followers" (Hotta 2011, 191). In Bose's writings, Japan had a special and historic mission to play in the liberation of Asia. The victory against Russia marked the beginning of "Asia's renaissance," which culminated in the war to "liberate" Asia. Indian "patriots," Bose claimed, "were fully convinced that Japan alone was in the position to take the honour" (Hotta 2011, 195–96). There was none of Tagore's reticence about the "nation" as an immoral "imaginary." Indeed, Bose was appointed the first leader of the pro-Japanese Indian *National* Army (INA) before his replacement by his namesake, the former INC leader Subhas Chandra Bose (1897–1945).

In 1926, a conference organized by the *Zen Ajia Kyokai* (All-Asia or Pan-Asian Association) was held in Nagasaki attended mainly by anti-colonial activists based in Japan, including Bose.[25] The conference attempted to forge a Pan-Asian imaginary based on *racial* harmony. "Future world peace," according to its manifesto, "will be preserved only if each race promoted mutual understanding [with other races]." Therefore, "Asia must forge ahead a promote a union and harmony of races."[26]

However, the focus was very much on an opposition to *Western* colonialism rather than Asian unity, and attempts were made to silence Korean and Chinese opposition to *Japanese* colonialism. As the *New York Times* reported, "anti-westernism" was "the only bond holding the delegates together."[27] Nevertheless, the Japanese government regarded the conference with suspicion and refused to endorse Pan-Asianism as a foreign policy doctrine preferring to engage with the emerging liberal international order based on the League of Nations. Without Japanese support, the institutions promulgated at the conference failed to develop and,

after follow-up conferences in Shanghai (1927) and Kabul (1928), the Pan-Asian movement petered out. However, the Nagasaki conference "paved the way for the emergence of an official Japanese pan-Asian foreign policy and in later years was also utilized to demonstrate the long history of Japan's pan-Asian commitment" (Saaler 2011, 101).

The leading proponent of Japanese Pan-Asianism in the interwar period was Okawa Shumei (1886–1957) who founded the *Zen Ajia Kai* in 1917. Influenced by Okakura Tenshin whose lectures he attended as a student, he played a prominent role in the imagination of an "Asia" including East Asia, South Asia, and the Islamic world in which Japan played a pivotal role as "liberator" and "leader." He "appropriated Tagore and Okakura's cosmopolitan civilizational critiques of the West and incorporated their ideas into. . .his nationalist vision of Japan's international mission" (Aydin 2007, 121). Yet his critique of the West, like that of Tagore and Gandhi, went beyond an opposition to European colonialism to encompass a critique of Western modernity: he sought to de-Westernize Japan and the Asia "in the name of civilizational revival" (Aydin 2007, 124). His explicitly "anti-Western" discourse led him to be accused of being the chief ideologue of "Japanese expansionism" at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal (Aydin 2007, 112). However, as a student of Indian philosophy, he claimed to be motivated by a desire to liberate Asia, and India in particular, from European colonial rule. He published many articles by Indian nationalists, including Rash Behari Bose, in his journal *Michi* (the path or way) and took advantage of the interest in India generated by Tagore's visit to Japan to publish the first systematic analysis of Indian nationalism in Japanese: *Indo ni Okeru Kokuminteki Undo no Genjyo oyobi sono Yurai* ("The current state of the nationalist movement in India and its origins").

During the First World War, Okawa opposed Japan's entry on the side of the Allies as a result of its Anglo-Japanese Alliance, arguing instead that Japan's national interest would better be served through the liberation of Asia. He, thus, formulated an explicitly anti-Western conception of Japan's national interest as a mission to aid the anticolonial nationalist movements throughout Asia and sought to influence government policy. Okawa conceived Asia as a "site of *national* liberation" (Aydin 2007, 114—emphasis added). This was in stark contrast to Tagore's imagining of Asia as an alternative imaginary to the nation.

In his *Fukko Ajia no Shomondai* ("Various Problems of Asia in Revival") (1922), Okawa spoke of Asians as a "*minzoku*" (民族) or "people" that had been reduced to "Europe's slave" (Okawa 1993). The time had come for "Asia to rise as one and throw off its enslavement." However, this liberation was to be accomplished *through* the nation-state. Japan, through its victory in the 1905 war, showed the way for other "Asian" peoples. Consequently, "the various *minzoku* of Asia, which are members of the same race (*jinshu*), first became clearly conscious of their identity" (Okawa 1993, 25).

The term *minzoku* began to be used widely in public discourse around the time of Tagore's visit to Japan and corresponds to his understanding of "Nation." However, it was not merely a Eurocentric category translated into Japanese; the term *minzoku* is fluid and could be used to assert a common sense of difference *from* the West, while maintaining distinctive identities *among* Asians (Doak 2007, 169). Above all, the concept of *minzoku* challenges dominant understandings of geo-cultural particularity in Westphalian IR where territory was seen as a prerequisite for sovereign statehood. In Japanese Pan-Asianist discourse, *minzoku* could be applied not only to Japan itself, the "nation," but also to the region, an (East) Asian community

---

[24] The *Dai Ajia Kyokai* (the Greater Asia Association) differed from other Pan-Asianist organizations in the degree of government support afforded to it. It was founded by prominent military and civilian leaders and articulated a distinctly pro-Japanese Pan-Asian imaginary through its monthly journal, *Dai Ajia Shugi* (Greater Asianism), which regularly featured articles by Okawa Shumei and Rash Behari Bose among others. According to its charter, Pan-Asianism could only be brought about by Japan: "[T]he formulation of the Greater Asia Federation is the historical mission facing the Japanese people today" (Aydin 2007, 177–78).

[25] It was attended by twelve Japanese delegates, eleven Chinese delegates, seven Indian representatives, two Koreans, one Vietnamese, and one delegate from the Philippines and passed nine major resolutions: (1) the founding of an All Asian League (*Zen Ajian Renmei*) and the formulation of statutes attached to it (reproduced in the English translation here), (2) the establishment of an Asian communication organization, (3) the establishment of an Asia Center (*Ajia kaikan*), (4) the establishment of a central financial institution, (5) the promotion of research into a common language for all Asia, (6) the promotion of a racial equality proposal with regard to the League of Nations, (7) the establishment of a research institution within the Asian League, (8) the establishment of an Asian University, and (9) the revocation of Japanese surveillance of Chinese merchants and workers (Saaler 2011, 99).

[26] Foundation Manifesto of the All Asia Society 1924 in Saaler (2011, 102).

[27] https://www.nytimes.com/1926/08/03/archives/panasiatic-parley-frankly-antiwestern-wide-program-is-outlined-for.html

(*ToA Minzoku*) conceived of as a "singular, rather than a plural cultural identity" ([Doak 2007](), 175).

Although Okawa's Pan-Asianism was initially rejected in favor of an engagement with an emerging "liberal" international order in the immediate post-war period, it was adopted as a central reference point of Japanese foreign policy after the Manchuria Incident 1931 resulted in Japan's decision to leave the League of Nations. However, Japan's commitment to Pan-Asianism was always subordinate to the pursuit of its imperial national interests. This can be seen in the "Amo statement" of 1934, an unofficial statement by the Japanese Foreign Ministry Information Division Chief, which has come to be considered the Japanese equivalent of the United States' Monroe Doctrine (1823). Through the terms of the statement, Japan asserted that it has "special responsibilities" in East Asia and reserved the right to act unilaterally in China in order to "preserve peace and order in East Asia."[28] This was extended through the Great East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere[29] to South-East Asia and through Japan's support of the INA to Asia as a whole. However, through its military expansionism and subordination of the subjugated peoples into a distinctively Japanese Empire, Imperial Japan failed in its "duty" assigned to it by Okawa: to "rescue those peoples that are being oppressed by Western nation" and "not to replace the Western nations in oppressing them" ([Aydin 2007](), 119). Tagore's Asia had become co-opted by the "nation" and subordinated to its instrumentalist goals.[30]

At its root, the Japanese Pan-Asianism was an *imperial* imaginary: it was an "an ideology that served not only as a basis for early efforts at regional integration in East Asia, but also a cloak for expansionism and as a tool for legitimizing Japanese hegemony and colonial rule" ([Saaler 2007](), 1). Asia was "the spatial and temporal object through which Japanese defined themselves" ([Tanaka 1993](), 77) as a *minzoku* or "ethnic nationality" ([Doak 2007](), 168). Japan could only be defined *in relation* to other Asian *minzoku* in a hierarchical order of ethnic nationalities (*minzoku chitsujo*). This was a very different imaginary from that of Tagore. As seen in the previous section, Tagore viewed "Asia" as a confluence of different spiritual traditions and saw its potential to articulate a different conception of society from that of the West. Asia, for Tagore, could not be "led" by a nation-state since the nation-state itself was a product of an alien modernity fostered upon it by European imperialism. Toward the end of his life, he grew increasingly disillusioned with the way in which his "Asia" had been appropriated by Japan to further her imperial ambitions and his prescient warnings remained unheeded in the stampede to war.[31]

Asia as "method"

After the defeat of Japan in the Second World War and its occupation, Pan-Asianism was widely discredited. Japan "embraced defeat" ([Dower 2000]()) and became a "client state" ([MacCormack 2007]()) of the United States while cutting itself off from Asia once again in a return to Fukuzawa's *datsu-A*. Throughout much of East and South-East Asia, memories of Japan's occupation and its attendant massacres, which post-war Japan still is reticent to acknowledge[32], discredited Pan-Asianism which was hitherto viewed as the legitimizing ideology of the Japanese "civilizing mission."

However, traces of Pan-Asianism can be found in the 1955 Asia–Africa Conference in Bandung.[33] Attended by 29 delegates mainly from newly independent states, Bandung was a momentous event in shaping the post–World War II international order. It brought into being the Third World[34], in contrast to the "liberal-capitalist" First World and "communist" Second, and committed it to non-alignment. For Pasha, Bandung constituted a "rupture" in the international order: independence was *asserted* not granted, suggesting a "promise of *perpetual decolonization*" ([Pasha 2013](), 148—italics in the original). Although he had long since died and would not have been in agreement with the core principles adopted, faint echoes of Tagore's "moral imaginary" could be found in the anti-imperialist rhetoric of the Bandung conference and in its calls for unity between "Asian" neighbors.[35] Asian societies did not need the West to talk to themselves; their principal interlocutors outside of the region would be the soon to be decolonized societies of Africa, not their former colonial masters.

An exception, however, was made for Japan. Despite opposition from leaders of those states that Japan had invaded, the Prime Minister of Japan was invited on the insistence of his Indian counterpart, Jawaharlal Nehru, as an observer. Unofficially, the invitation had the approval of Zhou Enlai, the delegate of Japan's main enemy in the emerging Cold War era, the PRC. The process of Japan's reintegration within Asian had thus begun. Although the rapprochement was strained given the contested memories of the Second World War and the absence of diplomatic relations between the PRC and Japan, Japanese intellectuals began to re-engage with China, not as a former colony, but as another *Asian* society with a different, yet equally valid, path to modernity. In a lecture on modernity in 1961, the Japanese sinologist, [Takeuchi Yoshimi (2005)](), first introduced the idea of "Asia as method." Takeuchi argued that Japan and China represented two distinct models of "Oriental modernization." Rather than comparing Japan constantly with the West, he suggested a comparison with other Asian societies. However, Takeuchi realized that "Asia" could never be conscious of itself before it was colonized by the West. "The historical colonization of Asia by the West," as Naoki Sakai has argued, "is not something accidental to the essence of Asia; it is essential to the possibility of Asia. . .Asia was a *postcolonial* entity from the outset ([Sakai 2006](), 169)." This explained why Japan was, "in some ways more western that the West" ([Takeuchi 2005](), 161) yet never accepted as part of the West. For Takeuchi, "Asia as method" could be used

---

[28] https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1931-41v01/pg_224.

[29] In the "Great East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere," echoes can be found of a Sino-centric order with Japan replacing China at the center, surrounded by four zones: a zone of "independent" states (Nanjing-China, Manchukuo, and Thailand); semi-independent protectorates (Burman, Philippines, and Java); a zone of regions deemed "key areas for the defense of greater Asia" directly controlled by Japan (*chokkatsuryo*); and a zone of colonies which would remain under European colonial rule ([Saaler 2007](), 12–13).

[30] This was equally true of Indian Pan-Asianists such as the INA leader Subhas Chandra Bose who used Pan-Asianism to get Japanese military support for India's "war of national self-determination" from the British. No distinction was made by Bose between the Japanese and their European axis allies (and indeed the USSR) which had visited before his daring submarine journey to Tokyo. All were potential allies in India's anti-colonial struggle. Pan-Asianism "was merely one of the means to reach national independence, not a goal in itself" Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia*, p. 185.

[31] Tagore's last visit to Japan was in 1929 and he died before the adoption of Pan-Asianism as the official ideology of Empire.

[32] See the various contributions to [Breen (2008)]() for an analysis of the memorialization of the war dead in Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. Former Japanese PM Abe Shinzo frequently visited the shrine, which contains the remains of Class-A war criminals executed by the Tokyo tribunal, during his tenure.

[33] See the various contributions to [Pham and Shilliam (2016)]().

[34] See [Prashad (2007)]().

[35] See the Afterword by Craig Murphy in [Pham and Shilliam (2016](), 216–17).

to redeem the emancipatory promise of Enlightenment values by illustrating the *limitations* of Western conceptions of modernity and commitment to those values. He cites the example of equality and concedes that although it "might exist in Europe, one glance at the history of Europe's colonial exploitation in Asia and Africa reveals that equality has not been attained by all." However, rather than a complete rejection of these values, Takeuchi argued that "the Orient must change the West in order to further elevate those universal values that the West itself produced." Only such a "a rollback of culture or values would create universality." However, once this "rollback takes place," Asia must have its "own cultural values" which "do not already exist, in substantive form." Rather, "Asia" is possible as "method" meaning, "as the process of the subject's self-formation" (Takeuchi 2005, 165).

Chen Kuan-Hsing further expanded upon Takeuchi's framework by examining the possibilities which "Asia as method" had for *decolonising* the knowledge structures undergirding conventional understandings of modernity which give epistemological privilege to the West. Bringing Takeuchi into conversation with Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), Wang Hui (2011), Ashis Nandy (1983) and Partha Chatterjee (1985), Chen's "Asia as method" seeks to decenter the West and at the same time to transform "Asia" itself. "Through the use of Asia as method, a society in Asia may be inspired by how other Asian societies deal with problems similar to its own, and thus overcome unproductive anxieties and develop new paths of engagement (Chen 2010, 212). Chen is aware of the Orientalist genealogy of Asia but stresses its potential as a site of critique of Western conceptions of modernity. The concept of Asia, in Wang Hui's words, is simultaneously

> colonial and also anti-colonial; it is nationalist and is also internationalist; it is European, but also in turn has shaped the self-understanding of Europe; it is tightly connected to the question of the nation-state, and is over lapping with the perspective of the empire; it is a civilizational conception relation to Europe, but is also a geographical category established in geo-political relations.' (Wang 2002, 204)

In short, Asia has no "essence" which distinguishes it from other geo-cultural entities such as "Europe" to which it is geographically connected. For Naoki Sakai, "to talk about Asia is invariably to talk about the West" as "there is nothing common in many parts of Asia" except for its "objectification and subjugation to the West" (Sakai 2006, 170). Yet it cannot be dismissed as a mere Orientalist construction. The myriad of different geocultural traditions that encompass "Asia" bring into question the monopoly of the West in defining modernity and as the main locus of enunciation for IR. At the same time, there are no Asian societies "uncontaminated" by colonial encounter and its destructive effects. For colonialism, following Nandy (1983, 2), can be seen as a *psychological* state "rooted in earlier forms of social consciousness between colonizers and the colonized. It represents a certain cultural continuity and carries a certain cultural baggage." For Nandy, "colonialism is an indigenous process released by external forces" since it brings to the center of colonial culture subcultures previously recessive or subordinate in both the colonizer and colonized. Colonialism, therefore, has a transformative effect on both colonizer and colonized; the histories of Asia and Europe are inextricably linked. Yet it is through the Orientalist construct of Asia that the hegemony of "the" West is challenged by "other"

Wests that form part of the consciousness of an emerging post-Western subject: Asia (Nandy 1983, 3). Asia as method shows how "western" discourses can be part of (modern) Asia even though they have come from the outside; there is no *authentic* Asian subject, but this does not mean that there are no Asian subjects. As Chen reminds us, "Asia as method is grounded in the critical discourses of an earlier generation of thinkers," who allow us to imagine new possibilities (Chen 2010, 212). Arguably, the most prominent of these thinkers was Rabindranath Tagore who played a key role in the construction of Asia as a subject distinct from a Westphalian imaginary through his critique of the very object of anti-colonial desire which animated his work: the nation-state.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Tagore poses the question of "whether the idea of a nation-state in the European model is a final destiny of all mankind, the only viable political form of collective belonging" (Kaviraj 2019, 27) or whether there are other political imaginaries that are more inclusive than the nation-state and more conducive to the recovery of "human" values he saw as residing in the "spiritual" values of the East. His conception of Asia which he developed in dialogue with Okakura Tenshin may be seen as an example of an alternative imaginary which could potentially encompass all the potential peoples of Asia, including the colonial powers, yet it did not describe a geo-cultural entity which had ever existed. His "pan-Asianism" was a "vision of community that sought to transcend the territorial nation-state and redeem and regenerate the world through Eastern spiritual morality" (Duara 1998, 655). Yet the fundamental question of *how* this "moral imaginary" could be brought into being *without* hegemony remained unanswered paving the way for the co-option of his "Asia" by Japanese imperialism. Arguably, it was only after decolonization and the bloodbath of partition which his writings so presciently anticipated that such a moral imaginary would be possible with the birth of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Yet this anti-imperial formation too rested on the foundations of what Tagore regarded as a failed moral imaginary: the Westphalian nation-state. After decolonization, the alternative conception of political community that Tagore helped formulate became nationalized and in the independent India which he never lived to see, he joined the pantheon of anti-colonial nationalist thinkers; his ideas as well as his music appropriated by the new nation.

However, the inability of Pan-Asianism to realize or at least attempt to realize—as in the case of Pan-Africanism, Pan-Arabism, or the latter-day European Union (EU)—an alternative form of political community should *not* be read as failure. Tagore foreshadowed and greatly contributed to the development of the NAM that sought to distance the newly independent states of Asia and Africa from two competing forms of Eurocentrism: the capitalist "West" and communist "East." As a political movement, Pan-Asianism contributed to the retreat of Empire in Asia by providing legitimacy first to Japanese military action against European colonial powers and second to "local" attempts to resist the reimposition of colonial rule in those territories "liberated" from Japanese aggression by the Allied powers. It also forced the same powers "to formulate and promise a more inclusive and non-imperialistic world order at the end of WWII" (Aydin 2007, 189). As a "moral imaginary," Pan-Asianism allowed Tagore to critique not only the nation-state, but

also implicitly the "methodological nationalism"[36] which continues to characterize IR as it took shape after the First World War. As a "post-western," rather than an "authentically" Indian thinker,[37] Tagore's conceptualization of Asia as a "moral imaginary" hints at the "promise" of an IR not beholden to the nation-state, where the racial inequalities which resulted from colonialism are no longer confined to geo-cultural containers but are understood as global phenomena. Using "Asia as method," therefore, means dispensing with "methodological nationalism": using societies in Asia as each other's point of reference merely reinforces and reproduces the Westphalian imaginary. In order to unlock the "potential" of "Asia" as "an imaginary anchoring point" (Chen 2010, 212) through which to critique and go beyond the West, a new "moral imaginary" is needed. A return to Tagore is a good place to start.

References

ACHARYA, AMITAV. 2014. "Global International Relations and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies'," *International Studies Quarterly* 58 (4): 647–59.

ALLAN, BENTLEY. 2019. *Scientific Cosmology and International Orders.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

ANDERSON, BENEDICT. [1983] 1991. *Imagined Communities.* London: Verso.

AYDIN, EMIL. 2007. *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought.* New York: Columbia University Press.

BEHERA, NAVNITA CHADHA BEHERA. 2007. "Re-Imagining IR in India." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 7 (3): 341–68.

BEHR, HARTMUT, AND GIORGIO SHANI. 2021. "Rethinking Emancipation in a Critical IR: Normativity, Cosmology, and Pluriversal Dialogue." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 49 (2): 368–91. https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298211031983.

BHARUCHA, RUSTOM. 2006. *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin.* Delhi: Oxford University Press.

BLANEY, DAVID L., AND ARLENE. B. TICKNER 2017. "Worlding, Ontological Politics and the Possibility of a Decolonial IR." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 45 (3): 293–311.

BLASER, MARIO, AND DE LA CADENA, MARISOL. eds. 2018. *A World of Many Worlds.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

BREEN, JOHN, ed. 2008. *Yasukuni: The War Dead, and the Struggle for Japan's Past.* New York: Columbia University Press.

CHAKRABARTY, DIPESH. 2000. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

CHATTERJEE, PARTHA. 1985. *Nationalism and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

———. 1993. *The Nation and It Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories,* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

CHEN, KUAN-HSING. 2010. *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

COHN, BERNARD. S. 1996. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

DIRKS, NICHOLAS B. 2001. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

DOAK, KEVIN M. 2007. "The Concept of Ethnic Nationality and Its Role in Pan-Asianism in Imperial Japan." In *Pan-Asianism in modern Japanese History,* edited by Sven Saaler Sven and J. Victor Koschmann, 168–81. Abingdon: Routledge.

DOWER, JOHN. 2000. *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II.* New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

DUARA, PRASENJIT. 1998. "Transnationalism in the Era of Nation-States: China, 1900–1945." *Development and Change* 29 (4): 647–70.

———. 2001. "The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism." *Journal of World History* 12 (1): 99–130.

DU BOIS, W.E.B. 1903. *The Souls of Black Folk.* Chicago, IL: A.C. McClurg.

EISENSTADT, SHMUEL NOAH. 2000. "Multiple Modernities." *Daedalus* 129 (1): 1–29.

GONG, GERRIT W. 1984. *Standards of Civilisation in International Society.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

HEGEL, G.W.F. [1920] 1967. *Hegel's Philosophy of Right,* translated with Notes by T M Knox. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

HOBSON, JOHN. M. 2012. *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760–2010.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

HOBSON, JOHN M., AND ALINA SAJED. 2017. "Navigating beyond the Eurofetishist Frontier of Critical IR Theory." *International Studies Review* 19 (4): 547–72.

HOTTA, ERI. 2011. "Rash Behari Bose: The Indian Independence Movement and Japan." In *Pan-Asianism: A Documentary History, 1850–1920,* edited by Sven Saaler and Christopher W.A. Szpilman, 191–98. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

HUTCHINGS, KIMBERLY. 2019. "Decolonizing Global Ethics: Thinking with the Pluriverse." *Ethics & International Affairs* 33 (2): 115–25.

HWANG, YIH-JYE. 2021. "The Births of International Studies in China." *Review of International Studies* 47 (5): 580–600. doi:10.1017/S0260210520000340.

KAVIRAJ, SUDIPTA. 2010. *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas.* New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 2014. *The Invention of Private Life.* New Delhi: Permanent Black.

———. 2019. "Tagore and the Conception of Critical Nationalism." In *Religion and Nationalism in Asia,* edited by Giorgio Shani and Takashi Kibe, 13–31. London: Routledge.

KURKI, MILJA. 2020. *International Relations in a Relational Universe.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

MCCORMACK, GAVAN. 2007. *Client State: Japan in the American Embrace.* London: Verso.

MIGNOLO, WALTER D, AND ARTURO ESCOBAR. eds. 2010. *Globalization and the Decolonial Option,* 122. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

MISHRA, PANKAJ. 2012. *From the Ruins of Empire.* New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.

NANDY, ASHIS. 1983. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

———. 1994. *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self.* New Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks.

OKAKURA, KAKUZŌ (Tenshin). 1903. *The Ideals of the East.* London: John Murray.

OKAWA, SHUMEI. [1922] 1993. *Fukko Ajia no sho-mondai ("Various Problems of Asia in Revival").* Tokyo: Chuo Koronsha,

PANDA, CHITTA. 1996. *The Decline of the Bengal Zamindars: Midnapore 1870–1920 (Oxford University South Asian Studies Series).* New York: Oxford University Press

PANDEY, GYANENDRA. 1990. *The Colonial Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

PASHA, MUSTAPHA KAMAL. 2013. "The 'Bandung Impulse' and International Relations." In *Postcolonial Theory and International Relations: A critical introduction,* edited by Sanjay Seth, 144–65. Abingdon: Routledge.

PHAM, N. QUYNH, AND ROBBIE SHILLIAM, eds. 2016. *Meanings of Bandung: Decolonial Orders and Decolonial Visions.* London: Rowman and Littlefield International.

PRASHAD, VIJAY. 2007. *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World.* New York: The New Press.

RAMNATH, MAIA. 2011. *Decolonizing Anarchism: An Anti-authoritarian History of India's Liberation Struggle.* New Delhi: AK Press.

ROJAS, CRISTINA. 2016. "Contesting the Colonial Logics of the International: Toward a Relational Politics for the Pluriverse." *International Political Sociology* 10 (4): 369–82.

SAALER, SVEN. 2007. "Pan-Asianism in Modern Japanese History: Overcoming the Nation, Creating a Region, Forging and Empire." In *Pan-Asianism in modern Japanese History,* edited by Sven Saaler Sven and J. Victor Koschmann, 1–19. Abingdon: Routledge.

———. 2011. "The Pan-Asiatic Society and the 'Conference of Asian Peoples' in Nagasaki, 1926." In *Pan-Asianism: A Documentary History, 1850–1920,* edited by Sven Saaler and Christopher W.A. Szpilman, 97–105. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

SAALER, SVEN, AND CHRISTOPHER W.A. SZPILMAN. 2011. "Introduction: The Emergence of Pan-Asianism as an Ideal of Asian Identity." In *Pan-Asianism: A Documentary History, 1850–1920,* edited by Sven Saaler and Christopher W.A. Szpilman, 1–33. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

---

[36] See Sankaran Krishna, "Race, Merit and the Moral Economy of IR." Keynote Address, Millennium Conference, London School of Economics, October 22, 2021, for a discussion of the centrality of "methodological nationalism" to IR.

[37] For Kaviraj, "Tagore, like most of what is modern in India, cannot be understood without the language that comes from the West as much as the language that comes from the past." (Kaviraj 2014, 217).

SAID, EDWARD. 1978. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.

SAKAI, NAOKI. 2006. "You Asians: on the Historical Role of the West and Asia Binary." In *Japan after Japan*, edited by Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian, 167–95. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

SETH, SANJAY, ed. 2013. *Postcolonial Theory and International Relations: A Critical Introduction*. Abingdon: Routledge.

SEO, JUNGMIN, AND YOUNG CHUL CHO. 2021. "The Emergence and Evolution of International Relations Studies in Postcolonial South Korea." *Review of International Studies* 47 (5): 619–36. doi:10.1017/S0260210521000504

SHANI, GIORGIO. 2007. "Provincialising Critical Theory: Islam, Sikhism and International Relations." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 20 (3): 417–33.

———. 2008. "Toward a Post-Western IR: The 'Umma', 'Khalsa Panth', and Critical International Relations Theory." *International Studies Review* 10 (4): 722–34.

SHANI, GIORGIO, AND NAVNITA CHADHA BEHERA. 2021. "Provincialising International Relations through a Reading of Dharma." *Review of International Studies* 48 (5): 837–856. doi:10.1017/S026021052100053X.

SHILLIAM, ROBBIE. 2015. *The Black Pacific*. London: Bloomsbury.

SINGH, GURHARPAL, AND GIORGIO SHANI. 2021. *Sikh Nationalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

TAGORE, RABINDRANATH. [1917]1991. *Nationalism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

———. [1916] 1992. *The Home and the World*, translated by Surendranath Tagore. Madras: Macmillan India.

———. [1934] 2003. *Four Chapters*, translated by Rimli Bhattacharya. Kolkata: Srishti Publications.

TAKEUCHI, YOSHIMI. 2005. *What Is Modernity? Writings of Takeuchi Yoshimi*. New York: Columbia University Press.

TANAKA, STEFAN. 1993. *Japan's Orient: Rendering Pasts into History*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

TAYLOR, CHARLES. 2004. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

TOLAY, JULIETTE. 2021. "Inadvertent Reproduction of Eurocentrism in IR: The Politics of Critiquing Eurocentrism." *Review of International Studies* 47 (5): 692–713, doi:10.1017/S0260210521000176.

TROWNSELL, TAMARA, NAVNITA CHADHA BEHERA, AND GIORGIO SHANI. 2022. "Introduction to the Special Issue: Pluriversal Relationality." *Review of International Studies* 48 (5): 787–800, doi:10.1017/S0260210522000389.

VAJPEYI, ANANYA. 2012. *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

VASILAKI, ROSA. 2012. "Provincialising IR? Deadlocks and Prospects in Post-Western IR Theory." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 41 (1): 3–22.

WANG, HUI. 2002. "Imagining Asia: A Genealogical Analysis." *Horizons* 8: 144–208.

WANG, HUI, AND THEODORE HUTERS, 2011. *The Politics of Imagining Asia*. Cumberland, RI: Harvard University Press.

WEBER, MAX. 1991. *From Max Weber*, translated and edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. London and New York: Routledge.