

Collins, Michael. 2012. *Empire, Nationalism and the Postcolonial World. Rabindranath Tagore's Writings on History, Politics and Society*. London and New York: Routledge. 212 pp. Pb.: £85.00. ISBN: 9780415593953.

The 150th anniversary of the birth of Rabindranath Tagore in 2011 provided an impetus for many scholars and translators across the world to engage afresh with the vast output of one of India's foremost creative artists and thinkers of the modern era. If Amit Chaudhuri's *On Tagore: Reading the Poet Today* marks one such original attempt to engage with Tagore as a modern(ist) poet, sidestepping the obdurate and unhelpful categories of mystic and seer, Michael Collins's book promises to be an enduring contribution to our critical understanding of Tagore the modern-day thinker. Though one would not wish to draw too artificial a boundary between the two, this book, coming from a historian specialising in the intellectual history of empire and decolonisation, is primarily concerned with presenting 'Tagore as an intellectual' (p. 22) within a global historical framework of the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, and emphasising Tagore's keen sense of (creative) agency against the backdrop of colonial domination.

Motivated by the argument that postcolonial historiography has not accorded Tagore the intellectual standing he deserves, this book strives to explain, on the one hand, why 'Tagore has been consistently misunderstood, misrepresented, sometimes ignored, and in many respects diminished as a writer and thinker' (p. 1). On the other hand, it attempts to locate more precisely Tagore's importance for historians, political scientists and theorists of modernity, postmodernity and post-colonialism alike. It does so by laying out Tagore's 'distinctively universalist philosophy' (p. 22), aimed as a critique of certain aspects of modernity, and an alternative to both empire and nation. 'Tagore can help us better understand some of the failures of postcolonial theory,' (p. 14) claims Collins at the outset.

Offering by now a standard critique of Said's unfortunately essentialist take on "the West" vis-à-vis "the Orient" or "the East", Collins goes on to acknowledge Said's latter-day shift to a more nuanced approach to the ways in which the colonised contested the supremacy of Western hegemony. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said devoted an entire chapter to intellectuals of decolonisation from various parts of the globe committed to a larger search for liberation, and Tagore is included in the ranks of the likes of C. L. R. James, Neruda, Cabral, Yeats, Fanon and others. Collins, however, questions the *lumping* together of these individual thinkers on the grounds that they are dubbed "nationalist," even though their response, according to Said, comprises nationalist resistance "at its best" because it is always critical of itself. Collins insists that in Tagore's case resistance at its best must be delinked from any notion of "nationalist." Given how difficult it is for (Indian) historians and Tagore scholars to this day to think outside the nationalist/patriotic framework when it comes to a national icon such as Tagore, it seems nothing short of revolutionary to have Collins proclaim outright that 'Tagore was *not* a nationalist in any analytically useful sense of the term' (my emphasis) (p. 15). It is precisely this claim that allows for bringing Tagore into a fresh historical focus. A prominent part of the book is therefore devoted to author's rigorous analysis of Tagore's uncompromising critique of the modern idea of a nation, the nation state and its ideological corollary of nationalism, particularly after the Swadeshi movement went into decline.

Moving beyond the limits of both postcolonial and subaltern paradigms, with their respective “imperial-national” and “elite-subaltern” dichotomies, Collins strives for ‘a fully contextualised historical analysis of [Tagore’s] actual ideas or activities’ (p. 3). The portrayal that emerges is at once more complex and controversial. Here is a man guided by a fundamental belief that there is an inherent impulse in us – beyond instrumental reason and self-interest – for ‘creative, active love, which leads us to bonds of unity with our fellow men’ (p. 157). Tagore is thus portrayed in his acute concern for both “coloniser” and colonised.” He cannot accept the idea of “one West” or a purely negative critique of the Enlightenment, and adopts a view of Indian history that suggests that India “belongs” to no one. These are not novel propositions in themselves, but Collins deserves to be credited for his more systematic and rigorous analysis of existing debates combined with an intellectual historian’s linking of context and text. The extensive use of primary sources turns this into a path-breaking book. It is also what engenders certain new insights. As Tapan Raychaudhuri states in his foreword to the book, Collins brings ‘a genuinely new contribution to our understanding of the relationship between Gandhi and Tagore’ (pg. xvi). He also does away with some erroneous assumptions regarding Tagore’s winning of the Nobel Prize and the English *Gitanjali*, and puts the much-discussed and misunderstood relationship between W. B. Yeats and Tagore in perspective for us.

Aside from his engagement with archival material, Collin’s healthy suspicion of secondary sources has also led him to some very interesting discoveries. For example, a letter to C. F. Andrews written in July 1915, in which Tagore refers to Gandhi as ‘a moral tyrant’ for thinking he had the power to ‘make his ideas prevail through the means of slavery’ (p. 87), was excised from the sanitised 1928 book version *Letters to a Friend*. Likewise, a number of essays published in *The Modern Review* in which Tagore lays out his more controversial take on the West and India are found to be missing from Sisir Kumar Das’s authoritative compilation of Tagore’s English writings. Such omissions preclude the possibility of a more complex historical understanding of Tagore’s unconventional position on empire and modernity.

Tagore’s “anti-politics” that sees British rule in India as essentially ‘a failure of imagination and intellect’ (p. 13) went on to assume a concrete face in a “politics of friendship” across the colonial divide. Collins devotes a third of the book to analysing Tagore’s interactions with some key individuals from the Anglophone world. The cultural elite of the colonial power, with W. B. Yeats at its helm, are shown to have instrumentalised Tagore for their own essentially Eurocentric endeavour of a cultural revival in need of a spiritual injection from “the East”. The friendships Tagore forged in colonial Britain were many and guided by various motivations – C. F. Andrews and Edward Thompson, who came to live in India and learned Bengali, professed a different kind of attachment to Tagore than did Yeats – but they rarely questioned the underlying imperial power relations. The conflicts of class, race, religion and nation posed a great challenge to a transnational politics of friendship that was supposed to transcend them. Collins’s book is no doubt a timely publication for bringing Tagore’s complex answers to the age of empire and nation into new focus.

ANA JELNIKAR
Presidency University, Calcutta (India)