

Translating Tagore's 'Char Adhyay' with caste & religious politics of the 21st century

Tagore's 'Char Adhyay', the love story of two revolutionaries, invited a fair bit of backlash in 1934 for its critique of exclusivist hypernationalism.

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Panellists at the launch of Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Subhransu Maitra's *Four Chapters*, a new translation of Tagore's 'Char Adhyay' | Photo: Deep Halder, ThePrint

Kolkata: The launch of a new edition of *Four Chapters*, an English translation of Rabindranath Tagore's 1934 book *Char Adhyay*, took an unexpected turn. What began as an academic discussion at the Indian Council for Cultural Relations veered into contemporary political territory as scholars debated two critical questions about India's freedom struggle: how Tagore's stance on the Swadeshi movement evolved, and how an overreliance on Hindu religiosity kept Dalits and Muslims away from both the movement as well as armed revolt against the British.

"Armed revolutionary movement started when the Swadeshi movement failed to attract the masses. Tagore, who was actively involved in the Swadeshi movement in its initial days, completely dissociated himself from it by 1908-09. He was appalled by the communal polarisation, and did not support boycott by coercion," said Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, who co-translated *Char Adhyay* with

Subhransu Maitra and is an emeritus professor of history at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand.

In the introduction to *Four Chapters*, an Orient BlackSwan publication, Bandyopadhyay writes about Barin Ghosh, the brother of Aurobindo Ghosh who later became the famous philosopher Sri Aurobindo. Barin, Bandyopadhyay writes, recruited and trained volunteers in bomb-making and using firearms for armed revolt against the British. They were also given spiritual education and religious training through the Vedanta, the Bhagavad Gita, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Anandamath*, and the lectures of Swami Vivekananda.

Bandyopadhyay explained how *Anandamath* influenced India's struggle for Independence, and why it only appealed to a certain class. In the book, the country has been imagined as the Mother Goddess or 'Bharat Mata', and the revolutionaries as her children. Revolutionary action has been portrayed as self-sacrifice, necessary to avenge the violence of the colonial state.

"This held no appeal for the larger society and mostly for Dalits and Muslims. The armed revolutionaries mostly came from the Bhadrakalok class and were almost exclusively upper caste. So, even though there was mass sympathy for the revolutionaries, there was no mass participation," he told ThePrint.

Aggressive nationalism & a love story

According to Bandyopadhyay, he and his co-author Subhransu Maitra, a renowned translator and poet, are "political animals". The two met over cups of coffee on a sultry summer evening in Kolkata in 2019 and began talking about the resurgence of aggressive nationalism worldwide.

"We decided it was time people were fed some of the existing critiques of nationalism. This book is not for academics but for general readers who need to know about Tagore's trenchant critique of nationalism, which remains equally relevant in our time," he said.

Char Adhyay or *Four Chapters* is the tragic love story of revolutionaries Atin and Ela. Ela has dedicated herself to the cause of the nation and Atin, out of love for Ela, has followed in her footsteps. As the violence that follows makes Atin question the very nature of the movement that tramples upon love and compassion for a greater good, the book, set in 1930s Bengal, becomes a critique of exclusivist hypernationalism.

When the book came out in 1934, Tagore faced a fair bit of criticism given the prevalent mood of the time, which was more than sympathetic toward revolutionary nationalism and the supreme sacrifices of young people. "In response to the strong public criticism, he later offered a kind of apology, arguing that *Char Adhyay* was primarily a love story, and that politics was inserted as a 'secondary' element to add 'intensity and suffering' to the narrative," Bandyopadhyay writes in the introduction to *Four Chapters*.

Shukla Sanyal, one of the panellists and a retired history professor from the University of Calcutta, said that early 20th-century revolutionary nationalism had positioned itself as opposition to Congress' nationalism. "Even as the colonial state looked at them as 'anarchists' and 'terrorists', many revolutionaries saw themselves as children who needed to protect the nation they regarded as a mother," she stressed. The Bhagavad Gita instilled in them a deep conviction about the righteousness of their mission, even as Tagore was repelled by the violence.

Ironically, Sanyal added, many revolutionaries were great admirers of Tagore. Shanti Ghosh, for one, was all of 14 when she shot a British magistrate dead in Comilla (now in Bangladesh) on 14

December 1931. Sent to jail and tortured physically, Ghosh found succour in Tagore's writings during her years in captivity.

Tagore's relevance in the age of Trump

Tagore's idea of nationalism was not static. What he thought about nationalism in the 1890s, he moved away from by the time he wrote *Char Adhyay*, said panellist Himadri Lahiri, former professor of English and Cultural Studies at the University of Burdwan. "Three novels by Tagore, *Gora* (1909), *Ghare Baire* or *The Home and the World* (1916), and *Char Adhyay* show his gradual shift away from aggressive or revolutionary nationalism."

According to Lahiri, Tagore was not just critiquing the idea of nationalism promoted by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's work. He was also questioning his earlier self, which leaned significantly toward the Swadeshi movement. His fear of what aggressive nationalism could lead to is seen today in the normalisation of a certain kind of political rhetoric, and the rise of world leaders such as Donald Trump.

As they went back and forth in history and analysed the literary merits of *Char Adhyay*, the discussants repeatedly mentioned the pitfalls of hyper-nationalism and its spread, both in Tagore's time and Trump's.

"We are seeing a rise of a kind of populist, aggressive nationalism worldwide. Given the demographic composition of India, any nationalist rhetoric should ideally factor in the wider society and its margins so that it does not become exclusionist," Bandyopadhyay told ThePrint.

Popular podcaster Neerajan Saha, an attendee in the packed-to-capacity hall, was impressed by the professors' interpretation of Tagore's stance. However, he disagreed with the argument that Dalits kept away from Hindu religiosity.

Many Dalits in Bengal, both in Tagore's time and today, have been deeply religious, he said. "Use of Hindu religious symbols would not have kept them away. As far as Muslim participation in the armed freedom movement is concerned, intellectual stalwarts like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and Syed Ameer Ali had repeatedly made it clear that even the British were acceptable to them as rulers but not Hindus."

(Edited by Zoya Bhatti)