

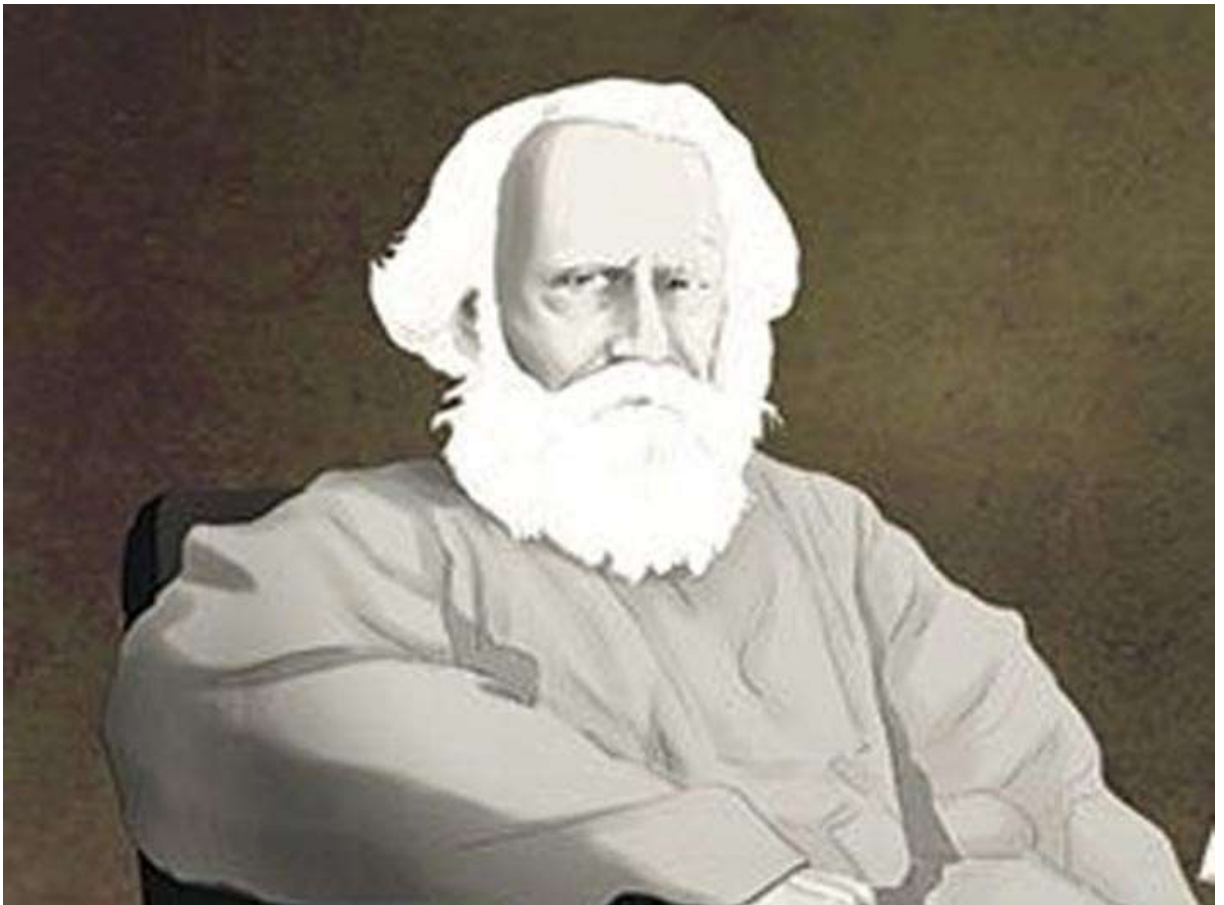
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New translation of Tagore's modern classic speaks to our times

After 'Gora' and 'Ghare Baire', the visionary poet-philosopher's 'Four Chapters' continues his critique of hyper-nationalism

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Four Chapters

By Rabindranath Tagore

Translated from the Bangla by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Subhansu Maitra

Orient BlackSwan, 120 pages, Rs 515



Rabindranath Tagore, a great visionary poet-thinker, had red-flagged the perils of narrow nationalism in his novels and in his lectures in Japan. While his essay 'Nationalism' and two novels, 'Ghare Baire' (1909) and 'Gora' (1916), are avidly read today to understand this phenomenon, his third novel on that theme, 'Char Adhyay' (1934), is not so widely known. It turned out to be his last novel.

As the co-translator, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, points out in his introduction to this new translation of the novel, the previous two novels were written in the days of the Swadeshi movement, whereas this third work came much later when the freedom movement had matured its ways. "It is more overtly political and foregrounds his critique of the violence and hatred generated by revolutionary nationalism in India", he writes.

The translation comes at a time when the world has been witnessing a resurgence of aggressive nationalism, with each nation looking for a distinctive identity at the expense of broader ideals of universal humanism and cosmopolitanism. The works of India's first Nobel laureate are as relevant as ever.

'Char Adhyay' or 'Four Chapters' tells the tragic love story of Ela and Atin, both members of a revolutionary nationalist group fighting for independence from British rule. Their love for each other is tested against their love for the nation. Ela pledges herself in service to her country while Atin, drawn to revolutionary nationalism because of Ela, soon becomes disillusioned with the violent path that goes against the values of love and humanism.

Through this intensely emotional personal drama set against the background of the 1930s' Bengal, Tagore presents an incisive and sobering critique of exclusivist hyper-nationalism that placed the nation above humanity, and senseless violence over compassion and love. A controversial book at the time of its publication in 1934, and a subsequent classic of Bengali

literature, it has regained relevance in the current political climate.

The introduction contextualises this work through a discussion of nationalist politics in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century India, and Tagore's engagement and disenchantment with it. He details Tagore's ideas on nationalism and situates the story within the broader historical narrative of the nationalist movement in Bengal and India.

“Tagore ... believed that the solution to problems like communalism and casteism should come through reform and persuasion from within, rather than through conflict, coercion, or state intervention from outside,” Bandyopadhyay notes in the introduction.

“Tagore's trenchant critique of nationalism—though a lonely voice of dissent in his own time—remains equally relevant in our time which is marred again by the resurgence of an aggressive masculine nationalism,” he says.

This compelling and impeccable translation of a modern classic is a must-read for lovers of Tagore and all those reading him for the first time.

Bandyopadhyay is Emeritus Professor of History at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand, where he was previously the Director of New Zealand India Research Institute. Co-translator Subhransu Maitra worked as Superintendent (Publication) at Netaji Subhas Open University, Kolkata.

Also see:

A note on 'Char Adhyay':

<https://cmsadmin.amritmahotsav.nic.in/district-repository-detail.htm?24884>

On Kumar Shahani's film based on this novel:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Char_Adhyay