

Translations



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Reflections on the Country

Rabindranath Tagore

*Translated by *Himadri Lahiri*



[“Reflections on the Country” was originally published as an essay titled “Desh Kotha” in the Bengali periodical *Bangadarshan* (Sraavan 1311/1904). The present translation is based on my reading of the essay in *Rabindra-Rachanabali* (Sulabh Sangskaran), vol. 5, pp. 776-79. Visva-Bharati, Pous, 1394.

The essay is a response to Dinesh Chandra Sen’s review of *Desh Kotha* (1904) written by Sakharam Ganesh Deuskar (1869 -1912). The book was banned in 1910 by the British government. Views expressed by Sen in his review serves as a cue to Rabindranath Tagore’s own reflections on the contemporary conditions of the country. Tagore explores the concept of patriotism which is strikingly different from that of contemporary scholars. He delves into the issues of patriotism and *deshohitaishita* against the backdrop of economic policies pursued in India under the British colonial regime. He differentiates between the two terms and argues that ‘patriotism’ is essentially a foreign concept, based as it is on a selfish love for one’s own country, and cannot be equated with the Bengali term *deshohitaishita* which, according to him, is a much-debated word. Tagore seems to suggest that the latter has a broader frame of reference, indicating that it is not merely a love for the country in the narrow sense of the term. He believes that patriotism lacks a Bengali equivalent, with the closest term being *swadishikata*. – Translator]

Respected Srijukta Dinesh Chandra Sen has sent us a review of Srijukta Sakharam Deuskar's book *Desh Kotha* (Reflections on the Country). At the outset, he writes:

The topics discussed in this book are not original. The book is based on subjects that have long been discussed by some Englishmen, all well-wishers of India, such as Mr. Digby, and some prominent children of India like Dadabhai Naoroji and Ramesh Chandra Dutta. Many theories about India's current conditions remained vague in our minds, and reading of this book has shaped these ideas into distinct, vibrant, and well-defined forms.

The condition of Indian business and commerce in contemporary times as represented here approaches the state of mind of a person who chances upon a lovely garden full of beautiful flowers, now withered by heat, or suddenly comes across the skeletal figure of a once-handsome, familiar friend. Yet, Babu Deuskar has not delivered a provocative lecture. The truth derived from numerals, as well as census and statistics, will imperceptibly reveal a heart-rending spectacle. This spectacle is like that of a tragic play – the difference is that there is no scope for imagined sorrow; it has projected the picture of our own distress and death. The author, like a physician, evokes a sense of pain by reviving the site of our wounds.

A little while later, he writes, "Babu Deuskar asserts that if agitations are launched repeatedly, the government will certainly pay heed to our demands."

Is this the lesson we really learn [from the above context]? History has established the fact that a powerful nation willingly and deliberately destroys the claim of a weak nation. Do we derive the conclusion from this that only repeated agitations can recover the lost objects from a powerful nation? Is it that simple?

In response to this question, the agitationists would say, what else can we do? We surely need to do something!

We would say, if we have to do something, it should not certainly be crying in the wilderness. If we are asked what lessons we can derive from this history, we would respond that we have indeed learnt lessons, but they are not related to [requests and] applications. Our gain is this: the ideals of the English had [previously] won our hearts; our hearts were being weaned away from everything related to our homeland. Howsoever we might have been boasting outwardly, our inner selves were inclined towards the belief that there was no better civilisation than the English civilisation. That is why we were not able to determine what the ideals of our own country were and where the strength of our civilisation lay. As patriotism-based civilisation is now increasingly revealing itself as a hideous phenomenon in history, our hearts are feeling salvaged. Gradually, our country is properly winning back our emotions. This is a great reward. This is no less a gain than getting material wealth.

The opposing party would accuse: you do not consider *deshohitaishita* [the act of wishing well to the country] as a virtue! To that we would argue, the interpretation of *deshohitaishita* is debatable, it is useless to resort to verbal jugglery with the term. Indeed *deshohitaishita* is not synonymous with 'patriotism.' The concept of patriotism is of foreign origin, and it will not be

an issue if the term is kept foreign. If we must use a Bengali equivalent, it could be the word *swadishikata*.

Swadishikata tends to suggest that we cannot prioritise anything above *swadesh* [one's own country]. You can claim anything, be it righteousness or kindness, provided the interest of *swadesh* is not affected. However, when an issue affects the interest of the *swadesh*, everything, be it truth, or kindness, or benevolence, drowns into insignificance. When you accord a privileged place to the *swadeshio* [i.e., patriotic] selfishness, it expresses itself [well] in the term 'patriotism.'

Selfishness never restrains itself [even] for the sake of righteousness; it does so [only] for self-interest. The English never consider that French civilisation has any utility in the world. If this civilisation is harmed, the entire humanity, including us, will also be harmed. The English, if necessary, can swallow the French like a pill without any hesitation in order to fill their own stomach. The only reason for their hesitation is this realisation: "We are strong, the French are not weak either, and hence it is not impossible that we would lose both the capital and the interest in our pursuit of profit. It will not be a fault if we lop off branches and twigs of Asia and Africa instead to satisfy our greed. Hence, there is no need to have our cheeks flushed in shame during the process of sending a peace mission to Tibet."

It can be clearly understood from this that if selfishness is given even a small space on the periphery of the seat of righteousness, it will inevitably push righteousness out. Therefore, *swadeshi* selfishness is attempting to stun everyone, including God, by emphatically declaring itself across the world.

Everybody is familiar with the name of the celebrated traveller Sven Hedin. He observes about the English invasion of Tibet:

The English campaign in Tibet is a fresh proof of the Imperialist brutality which seems to characterise the political tendencies of our times, and in face of which the position of the smaller states appears precarious. A small state which does not possess the power to defend itself is doomed to decay, whether it is Christian or not. If our priests taught the people the meaning of the words 'Love thy neighbours as thyself', 'Thou shalt not steal', 'Thou shalt do no murder', 'Peace on earth and goodwill towards men', instead of losing themselves and their hearers in unfathomable and completely useless dogmas, such an injustice as the present one would be impossible. But probably such really Christian feelings are nonsense in modern polity. And the same Christians send our missionaries to Japan. In the name of truth one ought to protect the Asiatics from such Christianity.

We will have to acknowledge the importance of these words. Once we realise that the telegraph, the railway carriages and big schools are not the real components and signifiers of civilisation, we have to look elsewhere to attain humanity – then the realisation may dawn that it is not essential for us to accept the discipleship of the Western arm-bearers. Then the ideals of our own country and our own strength will not seem despicable.

However, where will the ideals of your country and your own righteousness stand if you turn pale and wither away due to lack of nourishment and energy? Where is the scope for the

unhindered exercise of strength needed to protect these ideals? That is why we are forced to submit our application – it will be futile if you fail to pass the resolution in correct English!

An attack on the conflict of *swadeshio* selfishness on one side naturally engenders efforts to protect *swadeshio* interests on the other. This process leads to the evolution of what is known in English as a ‘nation,’ which refers to a community united by political interests.

It is impossible for this concept not to have crept in the contemporary conditions of our country. For this reason, we need to be free of this delusion. It is meaningless to nourish excessive obsession about something we have to adopt due to unavoidable compulsion. We should not believe that the ultimate gain of humanity consists in the establishment of a realm of national interests. Over and above that we have to protect righteousness – we have to recognise humanity above nationality. Selling off humanity every now and then for the benefit of nationality, or resorting to lies, deception, and heartlessness, all amount to being swindled. After a series of experiences of being cheated, it would be discovered one day that we, with our nationality, are almost on the brink of bankruptcy. This happens because selfishness tends to drive us towards narrow-mindedness. One may cite the following as proof: in the Boer War, there were piles of adulteration in the provisions of the English. The same thing was noticed in the case of the Russians while they were at war with Japan. If nationality sells off the bliss of humanity, then one day individual interests would sell off the benefits of nationality. There can be no exception. It is not true that only natural law is unfailing; the law of righteousness is also infallible.

The impact of childhood education is not negligible. Despite having Indian flesh and bones, a learned man like Dineshbabu, in course of critically reviewing *Desher Kotha*, writes: “While the government keeps one eye fixed on the welfare and future development of the Indians, its other eye [simultaneously] would be focused on the toes of the sea-girded goddess of commerce, a resident of a white island. In no way can we consider this unjustified.”

If one of its two eyes were reserved for this side of the sea and the second for the other side, the norms of judgement would have remained balanced. But does Deuskar Mahasaya’s book testify to that? To tell the truth, nowadays many of us believe that all the injustice would turn into justice at the golden touch of the philosopher’s stone.

Whatever it may be, we have to bind a nation together – but not by imitating the English model. We must come together to safeguard, in all possible ways, the essence and vitality that lie hidden within our people; we will have to liberate our souls and allow a free play of our genius. We must make our society completely liberated and strong. This requires a complete surrender of our emotion and respect to our *swadesh*, our own country – all of which were mis-directed due to [inappropriate] education and [unfavourable] circumstances, and now need to be redirected back home. We hope that Deuskar Mahasaya’s book will guide us on this path and not encourage us to engage in repeated, futile agitations.

1311 (1904)

About the Translator



Professor Himadri Lahiri retired from the Department of English and Culture Studies, The University of Burdwan, West Bengal, India in 2016. Subsequently, he taught at the Department of English, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan for about a year. He is currently serving the School of Humanities, Netaji Subhas Open University, Kolkata as Professor of English. Lahiri has written extensively on Diaspora Studies and Indian English literature. His recent publications include two books – *Asia Travels: Pan-Asian Cultural Discourses and Diasporic Asian Literature/s in English* (Birutjatiya, 2021) and *Diaspora Theory and Transnationalism* (Orient BlackSwan, 2019), four book chapters – “Pioneers Across Kala pani: Reading Girmityas etc.” (Routledge, 2021), “Generational Perspectives in Partition Narratives” (Pencraft, 2022), “Citizenship Question in the Transnational Context: Literary Perspectives” (Routledge, 2022) and “The Sea Is History: The Concept of Space in Women’s Kala Pani Crossings” (Routledge, 2023) – as well as a journal article “Reading Modernism in *The Waste Land*: Eliot’s Use of Montage and Collage” *DUJES, Dibrugarh University Journal of English Studies* (vol. 30, March 2022). At present, he is working on a book project on the Partition of India.