

RECLAIMING HUMANITY, REMOVED IN SPACE AND TIME: RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S "LETTER RENOUNCING KNIGHTHOOD" IN 1919 BRITISH INDIA

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On April 13th, 1919, the British General Reginald E. Dyer ordered his troops to open fire on an unarmed crowd of Indian civilians who had gathered that morning in Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar, for a religious celebration. Hundreds of men, women, and children were killed while others were thrown into a well to escape being shot, buried under their dying relatives' bodies, or left gravely wounded or orphaned. Dyer would soon be celebrated by many Britons as a "saviour" for teaching these Amritsar residents, as well as the rest of British India, a salutary "lesson" not to question Britain's colonial might (Sayer 143, 161-2). Devastation permeated India as the news of the massacre and of Britain's callous response to it spread across the nation (Pedersen).

I still remember these details, printed in the fine black print of a history textbook I had borrowed from my third-grade classroom in New Delhi, India, early in 2010.¹ Reading of the Amritsar massacre is seared into my memory as one of the first times I vividly recall feeling terror from an encounter with history. It was, indeed, seared into the collective memory of Indians in 1919 who were shocked at the brutalization and dehumanization inflicted upon them under British colonial rule. How does one respond to an event that is so horrific—an event that dehumanizes one's people—while removed in space, as other Indians were outside Amritsar, or in time, as I was nearly a century later?

The Bengali poet and Nobel Laureate in Literature Rabindranath Tagore was among those grappling with this question in the summer of 1919. English-educated Indians such as Tagore formed an elite minority in early 20th Century British India, which had historically distanced itself from India's masses to seem as "British" as possible in order to win favors from the colonial government (Mukherjee 30-31). Located in Calcutta, far from Amritsar on the opposite side of British India, Tagore seemed spatially and socially removed from the massacre. Yet in May 1919, he penned a letter to the British Viceroy expressing his dismay and renouncing his knighthood—granted in 1915 after he received the Nobel prize—to stand in solidarity with all of India.² Tagore's project seems clear: to re-claim Indians' humanity after "a degradation not fit for human beings" (Tagore). However, the form of Tagore's letter seems to be in tension with this project, for he did not divorce himself from "British-ness" to formulate his claims. Rather, Tagore used the language of the very state he is condemning—writing in English—and maintained deference to British authority by

describing the “honour” of meeting “His Majesty the King” and his “admiration” for the previous Viceroy.³ How can Tagore’s fundamental grievances against the British colonial state be reconciled with his dignifying of these British institutions?

In order to examine how Tagore establishes these grievances and conceptualize his sense of dismay, one might turn to the American journalist Alisa Solomon’s essay, “Who Gets to Be Human on the Evening News.” Solomon argues that journalism can “confer humanity on some subjects . . . and not on others” (1587). Specifically critiquing Western news coverage of Palestine, she emphasizes how, through “framing” Palestinian subjects without context for their experiences, “the humanity of Palestinians is thrown into question” (Solomon 1589-1590). Tagore’s letter reveals his awareness of how similar British media narratives dehumanized Indians. Poignantly, he condemns the “callousness” of British media, pointing out that Dyer’s actions were

praised by most of the Anglo-Indian papers, which have in some cases gone to the brutal length of making fun of our sufferings . . . smothering every cry of pain and expression of judgement from the organs representing the sufferers. (Tagore)⁴

Tagore’s emphasis on how “organs representing the sufferers” have been “smother[ed]” parallels Solomon’s critiques of portrayals of Palestinians in the 2000s. By denying Indians the opportunity to voice their “pain” and “judgement,” as Tagore observes, the British media trivialized Indians’ context of the massacre and made their anti-colonial response seem unjustified—just as Solomon argued that Palestinian resistance seemed “incorrigible” because the Western media “erase[d]” their context of “[Israeli] occupation” (Tagore; Solomon 1589). Notice also the physical connotations of Tagore’s language—“brutal,” “sufferings,” “smothering,” and “organs”—when describing the actions of “the Anglo-Indian papers.” This language alludes to the massacre’s grave physical reality, distorted by the media, of bodies “smothered,” “organs” destroyed, “brutal[ity]” inflicted, and human “suffering.” In turn, one perceives Solomon’s arguments that de-contextualized media coverage is not simply ill-informed, but explicitly dehumanizing: in Tagore’s portrayal, these papers inflict figurative violence on *all* “our” (i.e. Indian) bodies in their mockery of the massacre’s victims.

Tagore, however, seems also to transcend Solomon’s arguments, shifting from condemning decontextualized media narratives to inverting these narratives to dehumanize the British colonial regime. “Such treatment,” declares Tagore, “has been meted out to a population, disarmed and resourceless, by a power which has the most terribly efficient organization for destruction of human lives.” The alliterated “p” in this line juxtaposes the “population” of Indians with the “power” of Britain. Upon the Indians, Tagore confers humanity, expressing their tragic context of being “disarmed and resourceless.” The British, in contrast, become machine-like, an enemy to

humanity, using their powerful “organization” to destroy “human lives.” Tagore does not offer any context for Dyer’s actions, asserting that “it [the “power”] can claim no political expediency, far less moral justification” for the massacre—i.e., that no such context exists. The force of these words can be measured in Solomon’s own arguments: “acting rationally . . . distinguishes human beings from brutes,” so when a social group is presented irrationally, as Britons are in Tagore’s letter, they appear less than human (1588). Thus, as Tagore lays out his grievances against Britain, he presents the massacre’s consequences not only for the Indian masses, who were enduring violence, but also for the British colonial state, who, in his eyes, was losing its humanity.⁵

When his condemnation of Britain was so fundamental, one might question the form of Tagore’s letter: why would he choose to write in English rather than his native Bengali? The arguments presented by American philosopher Martha Nussbaum, in her essay “Compassion & Terror,” may offer some insight into this question. Nussbaum cites the Ancient Greek play *The Trojan Women* as an example where its Greek author, Euripides, “invited [his] [Greek] audience” to feel “compassion for the women of Troy” who had been enslaved, and whose men were massacred, by Greek forces in the Trojan war (Nussbaum 11). She moves, however, to acknowledge the paradoxical form of this play: Euripides evokes compassion for the Trojan women by making them seem Greek, allowing for the audience to conclude “they are just us, and we are the ones who suffer humanly,” so they must too (Nussbaum 11). Within this framing, Tagore seems to take on Euripides’ role of translating Indian humanity into terms a British audience could understand, writing,

The disproportionate severity of the punishments inflicted on the unfortunate people and the methods of carrying them out, we are convinced, are without parallel in the history of civilized government.

Tagore’s probing use of the word “civilized” evokes the British conception of themselves as a civilization—a notion grounded in the idea that Britons did not wantonly or barbarically kill other human beings and were indeed ‘liberating’ their colonized non-European subjects from such despotic treatment.⁶ By invoking this familiar concept, Tagore urged the reader to extend their sense of civilization to encompass the lives of “the unfortunate people” of Amritsar who had been brutally killed. His decision to write in English, a language that all Britons could understand, strengthens this exhortation: he could address British society at large, not solely the Viceroy. Thus, the form of his letter evidently enables him to reach what Nussbaum would describe as the “narrow” and “self-serving” “sense of compassion” all humans possess, using the English language and concept of “civilized government,” so central to Britain’s sense of national identity, to appeal to Britons’ compassion (11).

However, there is a crucial difference between Tagore's position and what Nussbaum imagines to be Euripides' role. Euripides was Greek, not Trojan, while Tagore was Indian, not British—the former from the society that had inflicted violence, and the latter from the society that had experienced it. Thus, unlike in the case of Euripides, the dehumanization Tagore was writing of reached him, too, suggesting that his appeal to the reader's compassion transcended Nussbaum's Western-centric analysis because it involved his own vulnerability. This is reflected in Tagore's use of the collective subject "we" in the phrases "we are convinced" and "we must strongly assert." There is something radical about Tagore's repeated decision to use "we" rather than the individual "I": he speaks for, and identifies with, the entirety of India, breaking from the tradition of elite Indians segregating themselves from the masses. Tagore's use of the English language takes on a new significance within this context. By 1919, English was not only a British language but also a colonial one, for elite Indians could also access Tagore's letter by virtue of their English education. Tagore's repeated "we" thus becomes an exhortation to his own social class' compassion, urging them to question their proximity to "British-ness" by illuminating how Britain's massacre threatened their humanity, too: if even he, with all his distinctions, was part of this "we," then so were they. By placing his humanity on the line along with that of "the unfortunate people" who died in Amritsar, in terms that Britons and elite Indians alike would understand, Tagore thus extends Nussbaum's arguments to seek compassion not for "the other," but for his own society.

It is in these references to his own position, and exhortations to other elite Indians, that we see the culmination of Tagore's reclamation of humanity. The American theorist Judith Butler's address, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," elucidates this aspect of his letter, for she argues that "the body" whose presence "is being actively ... destroyed by military force" should, in tandem with other bodies, enter "the space of appearance" (a phrase she adopts from Hannah Arendt), forming "a new alliance" (6-7). In the final lines of his letter, Tagore seems to present himself as one such body under threat, forming an "alliance" to reclaim humanity in a manner analogous to Butler's vision:

Knowing that our appeals have been in vain and that the passion for vengeance is blinding the . . . vision of our Government . . . the very least I can do for my country is to take all consequences upon myself in giving voice to the protest of the millions of my countrymen. (Tagore)

Tagore first establishes the "force" that threatened him—"the passion for vengeance" taking over the colonial government—revealing to him the "helplessness" of his "position" in British India. Though physically unscathed by Dyer's "military force" himself, Tagore exposes the massacre to be part of a larger structure that was systematically dehumanizing Indians. This leaves his body, as that of a colonial

“subject,” as vulnerable to abuse in the public arena as the body of “a transgendered person” “walk[ing] on the street” in Butler’s lecture (13). Tagore then seems to consciously enter a public “alliance” with the other bodies under “threat” (to use Butler’s words) by describing this letter as “the very least I can do” “to giv[e] voice.” Tagore might not have marched in public, as Butler envisioned, yet in the act of writing this letter he seems to achieve the same end. He attunes himself to other subjugated bodies, capturing the violence and brutalization that had shocked Indians well beyond Amritsar. He also claims an intellectual “space of appearance” (that is, a space of ideas surrounding civilization and humanity) that had long been dominated exclusively by the West: in his inversion of British media narratives and appeals to British compassion, Tagore’s “alliance” of Indians extends and re-conceptualizes this space to include colonized peoples.

The effects of forming such an alliance are profoundly important for Tagore’s desire to reclaim Indians’ humanity. Butler argues that the alliance confers humanity upon each “body,” for “no human can be human without acting in concert with others and on conditions of equality” (9). Tagore seems cognizant of this need to be allied, on equal terms, as he finally explained his decision to renounce the knighthood:

The time has come when badges of honour make our shame glaring in their incongruous context of humiliation, and I for my part wish to stand, shorn of all distinctions, by the side of those of my countrymen, who, for their so-called insignificance, are liable to suffer a degradation not fit for human beings.

The juxtaposition of the personal “I” and third-person “their” affirms Tagore’s awareness of his privileged social standing; “distinctions” such as the knighthood had separated him from his “countrymen,” including those slaughtered by Dyer’s troops. By renouncing the knighthood, Tagore sought to close this distance, creating the “conditions of equality” that Butler described. In his unique historical context, Tagore appears to extend Butler’s concept of an equal alliance by implicitly urging fellow English-speaking Indians to join. To them, his bitter mention of “[the masses] so-called insignificance” must have been particularly visceral: within the colonial state, they had often been positioned to trivialize the Indian masses while seeking “distinctions,” upholding a punishing social hierarchy that encouraged dehumanization and enabled this atrocity even as it promised them illusory political gains. It is as if Tagore sought to shock them out of their blindness, asserting that without an alliance affirming all Indian lives, no individual Indian would be treated as a full “human bein[g]” free from the threat of violence.

At its core, Tagore’s letter serves as a stunning vindication of Indians’ humanity, persisting in spite of this colonial atrocity. When the letter is placed in conversation with Solomon, Nussbaum, and Butler, it becomes evident how intricately Tagore developed this vindication. He turned exploitative media narratives against the colonial

state, used Britain's language and concepts to invite compassion for massacre victims, and formed a powerful, humanizing alliance in the "true space" that lies "between the people" (Arendt qtd. in Butler 2)—between himself, India's masses, and other elite Indians.

That Tagore could accomplish this much given his own removed-ness from the massacre is immensely compelling. It reminds individuals who are in some way removed from an atrocity that they can reclaim humanity in a language they know, with an audience they can interface with, despite the distances in space and time. It is an idea that resonates with me deeply as I realize, seated in my dormitory in New York, over eleven years after I first read of the Amritsar massacre in New Delhi, that I can shift from experiencing terror to writing in defiance of it.

NOTES

1. I re-encountered the history of this colonial atrocity during my first semester at Columbia, in Professor Susan Pedersen's fall 2020 lecture course, "History of Twentieth-Century Britain," where we read Sayer's article on British media responses to the massacre and Tagore's letter.
2. The Viceroy (at the time, Lord Chelmsford) was the British Crown's official representative in India and the nominal head of the government of British India. Knighthood is an honor granted by the British sovereign (at the time, King George V) to individuals for their achievements or service in a variety of different fields and disciplines.
3. A note regarding the question of language and the reach of this letter: it seems clear that Tagore intended for it to reach a far wider audience than solely Chelmsford. Despite the British government's attempts to censor the letter, its original (English) version was published by the English press, reaching the colonial metropole, and "vernacular" (likely Bengali and Hindi) versions of it was later published by the Indian press. See Associated, Calcutta 2.
4. Today, "Anglo-Indian" as an identity usually refers to persons of mixed ancestry. Tagore, however, is referring to an earlier sense of the term—Britons living in India who authored and published their own English newspapers, which were also accessible in the metropole. For more on British media coverage of the Amritsar massacre, see Sayer.
5. The broader argument that British colonial rule was degrading to Britons themselves would become central to Indian anti-colonialism, echoed by Tagore's contemporaries, including M. K. Gandhi. See Nandy on Gandhi's wish to "liberate the British as much as . . . Indians" (51), and his chapter "The Psychology of Colonialism: Age, Sex, and Ideology in British India" in *The Intimate Enemy* more generally.

6. As an example of the power of such liberal imperialist rhetoric—wielding British “civilization” against “Oriental despotism” to justify colonialism—see Mill 13.

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