‘Beyond the limits of nation and geography’: Rabindranath Tagore and the cosmopolitan moment, 1916–1920

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Abstract
This article examines the emergence of a distinctive brand of political cosmopolitanism across Britain’s Asian Empire during World War I. Rather than presenting this phenomenon merely as a response to Western developments (in particular, Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points), it argues for the Asian origins and political logic of such discourse. The activities of the poet Rabindranath Tagore in these crucial years, his voyage from Bengal to Japan and his scheme for an international university, are used as a lens through which to view the wider currency of cosmopolitan thinking and practice in the region. For, it is argued, while Tagore never committed himself to an explicitly ‘political’ cosmopolitan project, the success and failure of his international endeavours are best understood within this broader intellectual milieu.

Keywords
Buddhism, Confucianism, internationalism, Tagore, Theosophy

Towards the end of World War I, there arose an intriguing moment in the history of Asia’s struggle with European empires. Almost simultaneously across British territories in the region, elite expressions of nationalism merged with a new type of political cosmopolitanism. In India, Ceylon and Singapore, literati who had been at the forefront of patriotic literary and religious revivals – Theosophists, modernizing Buddhists and Confucian progressives – began to express visions of a new world order. These individuals did not cease to be patriots overnight; nonetheless, they did begin to hitch their nationalist aspirations to demands for a ‘reconstructed’ British Empire, an imperial federation and even a League of Nations that would each eventually (following the end of global hostilities) usher in a new age of peace and brotherhood (Frost, 2002, 2004).

Such hopes might still appear something of a sideshow compared to the main event of this era: the rise of radical anti-colonial movements that strove for full independence.

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Moreover, since those who articulated such utopian credos frequently owed their status to the global capitalist system to which European imperialism had given rise, their idealism will probably always remain suspect. Gauri Viswanathan (2004) has written that a ‘challenge’ lies in ‘evaluating the motives and intentions’ of these new internationalists. ‘Were they simply continuing colonial rule in a different form? Or were they genuinely crafting a worldview that sought an ideal meeting point as much between philosophy and politics as between a narrow, provincial nationalism and rank colonialism?’ It is perhaps not surprising that, until recently, the emergence of such a discourse has drawn scant attention from historians.

Erez Manela, however, is a scholar who has examined the spread of this more internationalist outlook. In his book *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, he argues that in Asia, as elsewhere,

[T]he aspirations expressed by the anticolonial movements of 1919 were international in their scope and ambition. They aimed to bring into existence a vision of international relations in which hitherto dependent nations would obtain recognition of their equality and sovereignty ... They anticipated a transformation of international relations along liberal anti-colonial lines, which would render illegitimate the suppression of national claims within imperial structures ...


Viewed from a pan-Asian perspective, which this article will attempt to provide, the historical coincidence of such idealism is striking. We might well agree that such a cosmopolitan turn in the thinking of Asian patriots – away from the narrowly national and towards the international – forms a pivotal moment in the region’s history. Nonetheless, there remain flaws in Manela’s thesis, not least of which is his all-consuming focus on Woodrow Wilson. As Karl (2008) has observed, the notion of a ‘Wilsonian moment’, quite apart from its profound Eurocentricism, necessitates Manela shrinking the field of anticolonial discourse to all but a small coterie of nationalists who engaged with Wilson and expressed his kind of thinking.¹

As this article will argue, the concept of a ‘Wilsonian moment’ also obscures the importance of those patriots across Britain’s Asian Empire who began to articulate their own visions of a new world order before the American President’s arrival on a global stage. Viewed from this vantage point – that is, from the colonial periphery – Wilsonianism appears as merely the last in a series of ideological appropriations that began when local leaders adopted (and adapted) notions of imperial citizenship and federation. Indeed, if Wilson’s ideas had not chimed so with this existing internationalism, it is probable that his celebrity in Asia would have been greatly diminished. Certainly, we should question whether such a new ‘vision of international relations’ signalled what Manela (2007) has called ‘a movement away from empire and toward the self-determining nation-state as the organizing principle in the non-European world’ (p. 224). In several instances, it appears to have effected exactly the opposite.

All of which brings us to the crucial figure of Rabindranath Tagore. In 1921, William Robert Goulay, the private secretary to two British governors of Bengal, told the poet’s supporter and recently appointed secretary Leonard Elmhirst: ‘Tagore is not a Bengali, he is an Internationalist and we can’t afford to have him disturbed at all, he’s much too valuable a person’ (see Dutta and Robinson, 1997: 191, fn). Five years earlier, Tagore
had made his first voyage across Asia to Japan to preach pan-Asianism, a journey that inspired his anti-nationalist tract *Nationalism*, which he tried, unsuccessfully, to have dedicated to President Wilson. In this work, drawn from his 1916 lectures in Tokyo and the United States, Tagore denounced the Western ‘cult of patriotism’ that led nations to ‘end their existence in a sudden and violent death.’ He claimed that the diabolic purpose of such nationalism, which held up ‘gigantic selfishness as the one universal religion for all nations of the world’, had revealed itself on the battlefields of Europe. For Japan, and Asia in general, Tagore (1917) warned,

To imbue the minds of a whole people with an abnormal vanity of its own superiority, to teach it to take pride in its moral callousness and ill-begotten wealth, to perpetuate humiliation of defeated nations by exhibiting trophies won from war, and using these in schools in order to breed in children’s minds contempt for others, is imitating the West where she has a festering sore, whose swelling is a swelling of disease which is eating into its vitality. (pp. 97–99)

But Tagore’s visit to Japan also inspired his perceived cure for such a malady. The French mystic Paul Richard recalled that one fine Yokohama morning, as he and Tagore stood looking out across the water, he told the poet of his guilt at enjoying himself in Japan while Europe was in ‘hell’. A week later, Tagore informed Richard that this remark had so affected him that he had arrived at his plan for what he would later describe as ‘a world centre for the study of humanity’, a place ‘somewhere beyond the limits of nation and geography’. Tagore’s Viśva-Bhārati university at Śāntinikétan would henceforth become the major cosmopolitan project of his lifetime. ‘The age of narrow chauvinism’, he told his son Rathindranath, ‘is coming to an end – for the sake of the future, the first steps towards this great meeting of world humanity will be taken on those very fields of Bolpur’ (Dutta and Robinson, 1997: 178–179; quoted in Hay, 1970: 126–127).

As with Wilson, Tagore’s remedy for what he regarded to be the suicidal mission of modern nationalism did not arise in a vacuum. To fully appreciate his intellectual journey during these years it is necessary to dispense with the notion of the poet as lone dissenter, so as to grasp the broader ideological currents then flowing through British Asia and beyond. As the rest of this article will illustrate, Tagore’s ideas of ‘Eastern unity’, ‘international cooperation’ and ‘world culture’ were caught up in, and given momentum by, these broader ideological currents – even when he himself was not fully aware of them. The conclusion of this article will try to explain why after 1919, and partly as a consequence of Tagore’s involvement in this broader milieu, his cosmopolitanism became politically tainted, rendering him a figure at odds with a new generation of patriots suspicious of any supranational aspiration that might be deemed valuable to an imperial power.

**Singapore and the ‘Great Communion’**

Not long after Tagore set off on his voyage to Japan in May 1916 he developed a strong distaste for colonial port-cities, regarding them as the ugly coastal harbingers of Western industrialization and the ‘trade monster ... which wearies the world with its weight, deafens the world with is noise, soils the world with its refuse, and lacerates the world with its greed’ (quoted in Hay, 1970: 60–61). He did not take long in these ports to form such
an opinion. He paused in Rangoon, Penang and Singapore only briefly, and during his 2-day stopover in Hong Kong, he declined to leave the ship.

Given the evolution in Tagore’s thinking at this time, this was rather a shame. By 1916, Asia’s colonial port-cities, as well as becoming crucial nodal points in Britain’s imperial and industrial web, had emerged as emporia of ideas where the poet might have found an eager audience for his ideas about Eastern unity and the need for international cooperation. Whether all his potential listeners would have shared his increasing distrust of modern nationalism is another matter. However, Tagore would have met at least a few like-minded intellectuals who shared something of his cosmopolitan idealism.

When Tagore’s ship docked in Singapore in 1916, the leading intellectual in that city was the Edinburgh-educated doctor, Chinese nationalist and Empire loyalist, Dr Lim Boon Keng. In 1924, Lim eventually met Tagore when the poet toured China as a guest of the Chinese Lecture Association. On this occasion, Lim travelled down to Hong Kong from Amoy (Xiamen), where he had become Vice-Chancellor of its university, to discuss with Tagore his plan to create a chair of Indian culture and history. Three years later, the two men met in Singapore again, after which Tagore agreed to write a preface to Lim’s translation of the classical Chinese elegy *Li Sao* (Hay, 1970: 147–148, 323). Back in 1916, however, when Tagore first passed through Singapore, Lim was half way through a remarkable series of public lectures, published soon after under the title *The Great War from a Confucian Point of View*.

In these lectures, Lim claimed that the British Empire embodied the Confucian ideal of *da tong* (literally, ‘great union’) and that Britain’s war efforts were necessary in order to ensure a state of ‘cosmic harmony’. In his view, the ‘oneness’ of the human race was a Confucian principle whose realization would bring forth a Confucian millennium. This the Western-educated doctor referred to as the ‘Great Communion in the Canon of Rites ... an era of universal peace, in which law and morality are both superseded by love’. Until such an era was achieved, Lim argued, war had to be ‘cultivated’ in the ‘interests of right and justice’ (Lim, 1917: 7, 100–115).

In putting forward these ideas, Lim was influenced by his political and intellectual hero, the Chinese reformer Kang Youwei. Although Kang would not publish his complete thoughts on the *da tong* until the 1930s, his ideas had been circulating through lectures, papers and published chapters since at least 1900. In these preliminary works, which Lim appears to have read, Kang put forward his evolutionary view of China’s history in which its own progress and reform was but one stage in the world’s movement towards a ‘universal community’ of the future. Kang’s *da tong*, in which territorial states ceased to exist, would emerge from the union of the ‘yellow’ and ‘white’ races of the world and the marriage of a scientific West with a Confucian East (see Chang, 1987: 53–59).

Where Lim differed from Kang was in his emphasis on the British Empire as the vehicle that would bring forth the *da tong*. As a means to achieve such unity, Lim advocated the further extension of English as the *lingua franca* of the British Empire (rather ironically, since at that same time, wearing his overseas Chinese nationalist hat, he was seeking to promote Mandarin as the common language of the Chinese across South East Asia). On the question of whether it was feasible ‘to extend the principles of British
democracy to all parts of the Empire’, he argued that it was. Democracy was necessary to ‘educate the masses, thereby removing racism, and promote ideals of equality’. For Lim, arguing from an idealistic ‘Confucian point of view’, the maintenance of the British Empire was crucial:

In spite of mistakes and imperfections, our Mighty Empire stands as the most magnificent democracy in the world. Justice and righteousness are the basis of our professed principles of administration. Only sympathy and knowledge are needed to complete that stupendous edifice of Empire raised by the union, the co-operation, and the love of multitudinous races, owing allegiance and recognising the one mother, whose noble example may well be the prelude to the federation of the world. (Lim, 1917: 100–115)

It is worth noting that Lim’s pronouncements on the need for Empire-loyalty came at a time when the allegiance of some parts of the Singapore populace was under suspicion. A year before Tagore arrived in the city, Muslim soldiers of the Indian 5th Light Infantry had risen up in what became known as the Singapore Mutiny. The official enquiry that followed heard evidence that some of these soldiers had been exposed to the propaganda of the anti-imperial Ghadr Party, which that same year had plotted to incite Indian garrisons to stage an Empire-wide rebellion. In late 1916, the Ghadr Party caught up with Tagore on his arrival from Japan in San Francisco. Two members were dispatched to Tagore’s hotel with orders to assassinate him as a punishment for his lukewarm support of India’s freedom struggle. Fortunately for the poet, his would-be assassins fell out in the lobby over whether to go through with their mission and so he was spared (see Dutta and Robinson, 1997: 428–429).

However, although the Ghadrites’ emphasis on political violence placed them at odds with Tagore, their cosmopolitan idealism was not so far removed from that which the poet was himself coming to express. This ultimate proximity of views comes to light when we consider the remarkable career of the Ghadr Party founder Lala Har Dayal. Having left his studies at Oxford to take up a life as a wandering anti-colonial revolutionary, Har Dayal arrived in San Francisco where he and his comrades began to advocate communism, cosmopolitanism and the abolishment of coercive government. Following the outbreak of World War I, he moved to Germany to plot his anti-imperial insurrection.

However, following the uprising’s failure, and having grown disenchanted with his German hosts, he underwent a remarkable transformation. In a very public turn-around, he became a born-again Empire-loyalist. In a 1919 letter to the Indian newspaper in Delhi, he avowed his ‘conversion to the principle of Imperial unity with progressive self-government for all civilised nations of Empire’. In letters to the press in Britain and the United States, he expressed his hope that the ‘British Empire of today will be converted into the “British-Oriental-African Commonwealth” of the future’ (see Hardayal, 1919; Harper and Miller, 1984: 238). The New York Times (1919) gave the story full coverage and described Har Dayal’s conversion as ‘one of the most important events of the last few months as affecting the peace of the British Empire’. Somehow, the cosmopolitan aspirations of a former anarchist had found their full political expression through the possibilities offered by a reconstructed British Empire.3
Colombo cosmopolitans

As Tagore sailed towards Kobe, similar ideas were formulating in the port-city of Colombo. Once again, Tagore would only visit this port years later, arriving there in 1922 and then again in 1934, and on each occasion making a deep impression on the city’s intelligentsia. Once again, it was a shame he did not pay a visit to the city earlier. Had he done so in 1916, he would have found Ceylonese elites, Tamil and Sinhalese, espousing the kind of multi-ethnic unity that he had once tried to foster in Calcutta. A decade earlier, during the Bengal anti-partition agitation, he had encouraged Hindu and Muslims street protesters to tie rakhi (bracelets) among themselves as a symbol of their brotherhood.

One year before Tagore’s voyage to Japan, and just 3 months after the Singapore Mutiny, Colombo had been rocked by its own violent upheaval: the 1915 communal riots between Buddhists and Muslims. These riots had spread from the old Sinhalese capital of Kandy, where they had begun during the annual Buddhist procession, the Esala Perahera. Suspecting a German conspiracy, the island’s British authorities enforced martial law and brutally suppressed the disturbances with the result that many more lives were lost. Among the hundreds of people arrested by the police and detained without trial were key members of Colombo’s lay Buddhist leadership.

In the lead up to the riots, these leaders had become involved in a mass movement that was the closest their island had so far come to popular radicalism: the island-wide temperance agitation of 1912–1915. Following their incarceration, and in a pattern repeated across the Empire during this period, they became nationalist heroes. However, on emerging from prison, certain of these leaders made public avowals of their loyalty to the British Empire. What is more, they set about joining with their Hindu, Christian and Muslim associates to preach a de-communalized and inclusive ‘Ceylonese nationalism’ (Frost, 2002). The climax of this movement was the creation of the Ceylon National Congress in 1919, which elected as its first president the Tamil leader Ponnambalam Arunachalam. In a remarkable inaugural speech, Arunachalam made reference to the Mahavamsa, the great epic that detailed the historic battles fought between Sinhala Buddhist and south Indian Hindu rulers for possession of Lanka. The founding of the Congress, he announced,

proclaimed that we have done for all with our petty differences and dissensions and that, whatever one’s creed, race or caste may be, if only in the memorable words of our Island Chronicle, the Mahavamsa, he ‘makes himself one with the people’, he is a true son of Lanka, a true Ceylonese. (Ponnambalam, 1936: 127–148)

Crucially, such expressions of a cosmopolitan ‘Ceylonese’ identity went hand in hand with a wave of international expectation. Both the Ceylon National Association and the Ceylon Reform League, the two organizations that combined to form the National Congress, campaigned for political reform in the belief that imperial federation was not far off (Ceylon Reform League, 1918: 28–29). Such hopes were inspired by, as one contemporary newspaper put it, the ‘growing school of Imperial politicians who stand for a reconstruction of the British Empire by federating the Self-Governing Dominions and the Mother Country and vesting the administration of the Crown Colonies on the Federal Institution thus formed’ (Ceylon Patriot, 1920).
These global expectations were nowhere more evident than in the pages of the *National Monthly of Ceylon*, the mouthpiece of Armand de Souza, one of Colombo’s most prominent newspaper men. Published from 1912 until after the World War I, the journal’s discussions of citizenship and nationhood culminated in an essay entitled ‘World Citizenship’, which argued that the ‘ideal citizen is the citizen of the world’ whose motto is ‘the world is my country, all men are my brothers’ (Corea, 1917a, 1917b; De Mel, 1917). De Souza’s own editorials revealed the overlap between his inclusive concept of Ceylonese nationality, his Empire-loyalty and his cosmopolitan hopes. In July 1917, in a leader entitled ‘The Most Closely United Empire’, he wrote,

> The world is growing confident in mankind and is dreaming great dreams. Men are speaking of a League of Nations which would be a United States of the World. Humanity is hungering for Brotherhood. And what of our Empire? ... No more shall we be two empires – ‘white’ and ‘coloured’ under a single name – but one, where all shall have rights as they are able to bear responsibility. The phrase ‘subject race’, which has been trying to creep into English speech under the influence of jingo-Imperialists who dreamed of a World-Britain of the German type (‘Deutschland uber alles’) we expect, will soon be anathema in all parts of the Empire. We are all equal subjects of the King – The British Empire is a ‘commonwealth of nations’: it must mean a brotherhood which, as Mr. Balfour said at Toronto, is ‘more than treaties and speech-making’, – an empire of the free. (De Souza, 1917)

In a further article entitled ‘The New Ideal in Politics’, De Souza spoke of the ‘Reconstruction of the Empire’ after the war and of the coming ‘New World Order’ (De Souza, 1918). Finally, in a 1919 leader entitled ‘Internationalism’, he proclaimed,

> The world conscience, the world opinion and the World Law – these are bound henceforth to take a large place in the politics of nations. There is no doubt that the practical arrangements for Internationalised rule will present very great difficulties – the idea is new, the nations are jealous of their hard won power and suspicious of one another, and mistakes are bound to be made such as might even throw the whole idea into temporary discredit. But internationalism as a world force has come to stay. The peace and progress of the world are unsafe without it: and, however slowly it may be, our century will see a marked advance in the realisation of a world federation and the parliament of man. (De Souza, 1919)

Such thoughts were hardly novel. Earlier, they had been voiced by the man who would become Ceylon’s most famous intellectual of the interwar period and for Tagore a kindred spirit. In 1907, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, in one of his last major speeches before leaving Ceylon, informed his audience that the nationalism he favoured, far from accentuating the ‘differences between men’ and hindering ‘a realization of the brotherhood and unity of humanity’, in fact implied ‘internationalism’. ‘Nationalism’, he argued, was ‘essentially altruistic’; it was a ‘people’s recognition of its own special function and place in the civilized world’. ‘Internationalism’ derived from ‘the recognition of the rights of others to their self-development, and of the incompleteness of the civilized world if their special culture-contribution is missing’ (Coomaraswamy, 1907).

Tagore and Coomaraswamy would later share many such ideas in common – and in person. In 1916, both men would simultaneously advocate the creation of a new ‘world culture’ as a panacea for the world’s ills (Frost, 2009). But for now, the Ceylonese art
critic provides us with our link to perhaps the most significant (certainly the largest) regional organization then dedicated to the ideal of ‘universal brotherhood’. For on his arrival in India in 1907, Coomaraswamy flirted briefly with the Theosophical Society, led by the Irishwoman Annie Besant as its newly installed president. It was Besant who, among all our cosmopolitan visionaries of this era, would place the highest stakes on her aspiration for a reconstructed British Empire, and she who would end up, politically at least, losing the most.

**Madras Theosophists and Home Rulers**

When Tagore brought his ‘Message of India to Japan’ to Tokyo in 1916, the press reaction in India was muted. Only in the Madras Presidency did his efforts appear to merit much coverage. Here, the Tamil poet and nationalist Bharatiyar (Subramania Iyer) berated India’s ‘great publicists’ for their indifference to Tagore’s mission and to the country’s ‘present intellectual and spiritual revival’ in general (quoted in Hay, 1970: 271–272).

Nonetheless, such apparent disinterest should not lead us to think that Tagore’s mission was out of step with India’s prevailing mood. By the time the poet sailed from Calcutta to Kobe, cosmopolitan political hopes had begun to be expressed at an all-India level and would soon define the country’s first nationwide political agitation prior to Gandhi’s *satyagraha* campaign in 1919. Critical to this outpouring were the Theosophical Society’s headquarters at Adyar in the southern part of Madras. Here, before she even officially launched her Indian Home Rule movement in late 1915, Besant sent her considerable publicity machine into action.

In early 1914, her Home Rule newspapers proclaimed that ‘the term Empire has broadened to signify a unification of peoples under a single scheme of government which should allow its co-ordinated parts the widest possible freedom of autonomy’. The ‘individual Britisher’ was challenged to ‘merge his narrow patriotism into a wide internationalism’ and the British government to ‘evolve a scheme of imperial rule sufficiently plastic to admit of an adequate amount of Self-Government’ (*Commonweal*, 1914b). That same year, Besant was inspired by the *Komagata Maru* affair, and by the delay of an Indian National Congress delegation to London at Gibraltar, to join the call for Indians to enjoy their full status as ‘imperial citizens’. Before she launched her Home Rule League in India, she travelled to London to warn the imperial metropolis of the ‘rude and sudden awakening’ the Empire would receive if it continued to ignore ‘India’s just claims for freedom and equality’. At the end of 1915, she set out Indian ‘Home Rule’ as a plan for the post-war ‘reconstruction of the Empire’ that would lead to an ‘Imperial’ and then ‘World Federation’ (Besant, 1914a, 1915; *Commonweal*, 1914b, 1915). This political scheme, later to be drawn up as Besant’s Commonwealth of India Bill, involved the creation of a system of government that extended from village councils in rural areas and ward councils in towns, to provincial parliaments and a national parliament which would in turn send representatives to an imperial parliament. In her 1915 version of this plan, India’s national parliament would control its own army, navy and communications, though Besant was later to argue that India required the continuance of the ‘imperial connection’ to preserve her from the threat of Russia (see De Tollenaere, 1996: 273; Kumar, 1981: 88).
Clearly, Besant’s ideas predated Wilson’s ‘principles’ of early 1917 and his Fourteen Points of the following year. They were, instead, inspired by the late nineteenth-century revival of the imperial federation movement in Britain – a movement that came to influence famous empire builders such as Cecil Rhodes, Lord Milner and the Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain. As an indication of the imperial origins of such idealism, we need to only consider her Theosophist contemporary George Arundale. In his ‘Home Rulers’ column in Besant’s New India newspaper Arundale instructed activists to disseminate, not just the propaganda being pumped out of Adyar but also the works of the Cambridge historian J.R. Seeley, the man who had vigorously debated imperial federation and the question of whether India could form a part of it (Owen, 1968: 159–196, 173).

Strikingly, Indian adherents to Besant’s political ideas included the great trinity of revolutionaries: Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Bepin Chandra Pal. By 1916, ‘Lal’, ‘Bal’ and ‘Pal’ had each publicly announced that imperial federation was the best hope for Indian swaraj (self-rule). New India (1915) reprinted Lajpat Rai’s claim that if India was granted self-government, she would be ‘a never ending source of strength to the British Empire’, a moral force able to make ‘her proper contribution to the world ethics and the world culture’. In Besant’s Commonweal newspaper, Pal described the new idealism of the period as the true reflection of swaraj since it eschewed the ‘gospel of isolationism’ found in most modern nationalist movements and embraced a universalism more reconcilable with Hindu ‘race-consciousness’. As Pal (1916: 327-328) saw it,

National autonomy demands, therefore, international amity. There can be no necessary conflict between Indian Autonomy and the British Connection. On the other hand the perfection of this aim will demand the formation of fresh international relations, until all the nations of the earth become as one people and the reign of universal peace and brotherhood is established in this world. The nationalist ideal of Autonomy or Swaraj is bound, therefore, to uplift and broaden our national outlook and endeavour from the mere national to the international and imperial plane.

Following his alliance with Besant, Lajpat Rai toured the United States and moved on to support President Wilson and his notion of ‘self-determination’, a term that Besant herself ultimately chose to adopt. Wilson also impressed Tilak, who had earlier founded his own Indian Home Rule League to rival – while it worked in tandem with – Besant’s. Nevertheless, when Tilak took his Home Rule campaign to London in 1918, he preached not a League of Nations based on Wilsonian principles but rather one that he expected to develop out of a reconstructed Empire. The following year, he explained this decision to a huge audience gathered on Madras’s Triplicane Beach:

The next question asked of me was, ‘Why don’t you ask for separation like the Sinn Feiners in Ireland?’ ... I said, ‘The League of Nations is established for the federation of the whole world. The political ideal of the twentieth century is not a separation of nations but a League of all nations of the world. If we are already in one league why should we want to separate from it? We want to be in the Empire on terms of equality. We do not want to separate ourselves, but we want to extend within the League of the Empire to such extent that the Indian League of the Nations of the world may come in one day.’ (Sarkar, 1997: 895–904; emphasis added)
Political hopes for a reconstructed imperial unity influenced both Home Rule leaders to the extent that neither publicly advocated severing the ‘British connection’. It might be argued that Besant, Tilak and, for that matter, Pal were merely working within the constraints that a nervous, war-time administration imposed on them, and that their hopes for imperial reconstruction ought not to be taken at face value. Yet this explanation fails to square with the effort that Tilak and Pal expended making clear to their followers the reasons for their change of heart, at some risk to their political credibility.

What did Tagore make of Besant and her Home Rule campaign and its seeming attempt to generate a new nationalism that allayed the very fears he had raised in his lectures of 1916? For several years prior to this, the poet held a strong personal distaste for the Irishwoman and for Theosophists in general. He might well have remembered when Theosophy’s founders toured Calcutta in the 1880s and 1890s, wowing half their audience with their views on Aryan civilization while leaving the other half with the impression they were merely quacks and charlatans (Raychaudhuri, 2006: 34–36). He was almost certainly aware that the movement had been the target of his grandfather’s Brahmo Samaj, which the Theosophical Society in turn derided for its Western-inspired ‘rationalism’ and betrayal of its original principles (Theosophist, 1888). In 1913, Tagore’s reply to an English associate who had asked him whether he had ever met Besant was short and simple: ‘No, and I never want to’ (quoted in Dutta and Robinson, 1997: 212).

So even when Tagore, in his first major political act since the Bengal anti-partition agitation, came out in public support of Besant, following her arrest by the colonial authorities in 1917, he made it abundantly clear why he did so: because a European woman had come to share the suffering of hundreds of Bengali youths likewise detained without trial and not because he shared her political ideals. Similarly, when Besant suggested that Tagore succeed her as president of the Indian Congress, the office to which she had been elected following her release – since he shared her cosmopolitan sensibility and so appeared the best man to unite various Congress factions – he politely refused, preferring to remain out of politics.

Nonetheless, in this age of cosmopolitan aspiration, the shared interests of both individuals made their meeting inevitable. In early 1919, Tagore accepted an invitation to visit Besant and lecture in Madras. On this trip, which commenced straight after the formal foundation of his own Viśva-Bhārati university, the great poet would have gained a first-hand appreciation of the Theosophist efforts to build an international centre for the study of Asian civilization – efforts that, since they had gone on for the previous 30 years, were likely to compete with own (See Dutta and Robinson, 1997: 181-185, 211-214).

However, not long after Tagore’s visit concluded, events further afield conspired to fatally dismantle Besant’s national reputation. As we shall now see, the poet who had travelled south to meet a fellow advocate of universal brotherhood and world culture quickly discovered he had one less rival.

A tainted cosmopolitanism

What significance ought we to assign this almost simultaneous outpouring of hopes for a new world order, in which the British Empire was expected to mutate into a new
Manela (2007) has argued that disillusionment with the internationalist ideal in 1919 played a major part in the birth of more radical political movements in the colonial world. Certainly, for those who had placed their hopes in Wilsonian principles, such as the Vietnamese radical Ho Chi Minh, the death blow fell at the Paris Peace Conference. From that point on it became clear that self-determination was not something victorious Western powers were going to gift Asian peoples, rather it was something they would have to seize for themselves.

But for those whose political hopes had become enmeshed in the idea of a reconstructed Empire, post-War disappointments emerged closer to home. In Singapore, the May Fourth movement that erupted in China in reaction to the Treaty of Versailles spread to local Chinese students who went on the rampage, rioting and attacking Japanese businesses. The British responded by imposing a new Education Ordinance aimed at controlling Chinese schools. Such interference was too much for Lim Boon Keng, the British-loyal prophet of the Confucian da tong. Lim had publicly warned his supporters back in 1911 that he was considering leaving the land of his birth on account of the Empire-wide ‘colour bar’ in the colonial civil service (Straits Echo, 1912). He made good on his threat not long after the 1920 implementation of the Education Ordinance, departing Singapore for China.

In India, Home Rulers were faced by the 1919 Government of India Act, the limited reforms of which made a mockery of their hopes for self-determination within the Empire. But, for Besant and the Madras-led wing of the movement, the decisive blow came on 13 April at the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar. On the eve of this tragedy, Besant made some infamous public comments in which she appeared to support the actions of the authorities in meeting ‘brickbats’ with ‘bullets’. As details of the massacre emerged, and its instigator General Dyer was hailed in England as a hero, Besant’s stance, and her refusal to recant, placed her clearly on the wrong side of the Indian freedom struggle. Her reputation in tatters, non-Theosophists and some notable Theosophists deserted her en masse. By the middle of 1920, Gandhi, who had sometimes behaved as a staunch Empire loyalist during the War (or, at least, a loyalist to his ideal of what the Empire might become) was moving towards describing the imperial connection as satanic. In that same year, he was elected president of the All-India Home Rule League and so began utilizing its branch networks and address lists to send out satyagraha posters (see Owen, 1968). Perhaps the cosmopolitan turn in the thinking of many Asian patriots derives its greatest significance from the widespread disillusionment that it fostered, a disillusionment that would prove fundamental to the rise of a more radical anti-colonial nationalism.

Having said this, we are led back to the issue of motivations. Why was it that leading patriots in British Asia embraced a nationalism that sought the maintenance of the imperial connection? Why did they drag the attention and the resources of their followers in this alternative - and, in hindsight, perhaps foolhardy - direction? Why did some go so far as to renounce their former extremism?

Without doubt, some of our Empire-loyal cosmopolitans were men of capital who had profited greatly from their region’s integration into a world economy dominated by the West. For this colonial bourgeoisie, their imperial internationalism might well be seen as the preferred option that allowed for a degree of political reform while avoiding major economic disruption. Conversely, for a more radical figure such as Har Dayal, his
newfound Empire-loyalty might be interpreted as merely the last-ditch gambit of a lonely exile in search of a way home.

But these explanations do not entirely suffice for they neglect the crucial factor of belief. As we have begun to see, the philosophical yearning for perpetual peace was not merely a Kantian fixation but had its roots in multiple forms of Asian millenarianism. In Singapore, Lim Boon Keng certainly became a wealthy man through his rubber, banking and insurance interests, but he strove for two decades to promote a Confucian revival that would reconcile his ancestral homeland with the modern world and bring forth a new Confucian epoch. Likewise, while several Colombo cosmopolitans owed their prosperity to the island’s booming plantation economy, their loyalty derived as much from their hope that the Empire would prove the vehicle through which the seed of the Bodhi Tree would be returned to the ‘motherland’ India, from whence Buddhism would go on to conquer the world, uniting humanity and awakening the ‘Sleeper of Ages’ (*Buddhism*, 1903; *Frost*, 2002; *Maha Bodhi*, 1915).

In Madras, meanwhile, Besant and her Theosophists were inspired by their Aryan racial theories, which told of a coming union of the Indian Aryan and British Aryan ‘sub-races’ to form a ‘sixth’ Aryan race that would lead mankind to the new dawn of ‘universal brotherhood’. Such was Besant’s belief in this coming new world order that despite the damage to her political credibility, she elected to denounce the new upstart icon of Indian nationalism, Mohandas Gandhi. In early 1919, she put forward her case against Gandhi in a series of *New India* articles (later published together as single volume). Influenced by the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, Besant argued that following the *satyagrahis* were crowds over which Gandhi and his supporters had no control. The English-educated classes, she stated, ‘alone appreciate the vital importance of maintaining the British connection’. Gandhi had ‘opened the door’ to a ‘revolution’ that aimed at ‘breaking the tie between India and Britain’ (Besant, 1906, 1914b, 1914c, 1919: 31–42, 54–64; on the ‘Great Plan’, see Besant, 1921: 45–52).

Writing in *The Theosophist* the following year, Besant went further. She claimed that *satyagraha* had by this time passed into a phase in which it menaces the very existence of India, her spiritual life, and her spiritual mission to humanity ... India, as an original member of the League of Nations, that glorious Herald of the far off Federation of the World ...; India as a Free Nation among sister Free Nations in the Indo-British Commonwealth, in the realization of which lies the future peace of the world.

Gandhi, a ‘disciple of Tolstoy’, preached a gospel leading to ‘anarchy and Bolshevism’. His ‘great disruptive movement’ had been engineered by the ‘Lords of Darkness’ just as the dawn of an Indo-British arrangement that would have been ‘the model of a World Commonwealth of the future’ could be seen on the horizon (Besant, 1920a, 1920b).

Perceiving that the world’s future was in the balance, all these leaders invested funds as well as time and energy in their international projects, transforming what might have remained a hollow political rhetoric into an energizing discourse that demanded converts. All of them believed they were living in a global age in which, as one of Besant’s newspapers put it, ‘human life has burst the trammels of mere national limitations’ and ‘mobility’ liberated man from ‘place’ and the ‘domination of local influence’, thus freeing him from prejudice (*Commonweal*, 1914a, 1914c).
So what of Tagore? He was certainly just as inspired by the era of globalization he lived through. In 1918, he claimed, ‘The territorial boundaries of the world have disappeared in the modern age. We the people of the world have geographically come closer. Our unity must stand on love, not hate’ (quoted in Das Gupta, 2004: 66). However, Tagore never invested the British Empire with his cosmopolitan hopes nor latched onto nationalist politics as the best way to fulfil his international plan. The poet who had largely remained aloof from Indian nationalism as it passed through its extremist phase did likewise when it passed through its brief cosmopolitan moment.

Nonetheless, after 1919 Tagore’s idealism, though it remained confined to a cultural sphere, could easily be construed as indicating his latent imperial sympathies. The suspicion that had led Ghadr agents to consider assassinating him in 1916 continued to plague him through the following decade – especially after his public criticism of Gandhi’s satyagraha campaign and his suggestion that international cooperation was preferable to non-cooperation (Dutta and Robinson, 1997: 215-218). This is not to say Tagore was ignorant of the political implications of his stand. His correspondence over the matter of foreign support for Viśva-Bhārati reveals that he was well aware of the bind that his internationalism might place him in. Writing to William Rothenstein in April 1921, to decline his offer of assistance in forming the university’s board of trustees (just a week after the poet had written to the same artist to seek out such support), Tagore explained,

If we must have a university it should spring from our own life and be sustained by it ... This is the first time in my life when I have come to the foreign door asking for help and cooperation. But such help has to be bought with a price that is ruinous, and the bird has to accept its cage if it must be fed with comfort and regularity. However, my bird must still retain its freedom of wings and not be turned into a sumptuous non-entity by any controlling agency outside its own living organism. (Dutta and Robinson, 1997: 264-266)

Given that Tagore wrote to distance himself from Rothenstein’s help only after securing the support of French scholars for this project, it is clear that the ‘cage’ he had in mind was not so much a Western but a specifically British, and American, one.

There were, of course, other significant strands of political cosmopolitanism that influenced Asian patriots towards the end of the World War I. Dreams of other new world orders would continue to inspire the region’s more radical nationalists until well after the next global conflagration in 1939. But just as obviously, these alternative dreams would become predicated on the creation of a new international unity that destroyed the old imperial one. By contrast, Tagore’s cosmopolitanism, though ostensibly apolitical and rooted in his spiritual hopes, remained traceable to an earlier current that had made no such demand.

After the disappointments of 1919, this current became tainted by its abject failure to bring about political change. When Tagore toured China in 1924, his idealism was denounced by a new generation of radicals as ‘the morphine and coconut wine of those with property and leisure’. As another Chinese critic put it,

If we were to listen to Tagore’s doctrine, we would soon be completely colonized. What we need is exactly the opposite of that doctrine. Resist! Fight until we bleed!’ (quoted in Hay, 1970: 203, 240)
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Notes
1. Karl (2008) writes that Manela’s argument ‘is circular: nationalists are those who petitioned (Wilson); those who petitioned represent nationalism’.
2. Bolpur was, and still is, the name of the town close to Tagore’s Šāntinikétan ashram.
3. For more on Har Dayal’s conversion, see Brown (1975).
4. The Komagata Maru was a steamer chartered by the Singapore-based Gurdit Singh in an unsuccessful attempt to gain entry for Sikh migrants into Canada, on the grounds that as imperial citizens they had the right to move freely and settle across the British Empire.
5. Tilak gave this speech on 17 December 1919.
6. The words are those of the later Chinese communists Guo Moruo and Shen Zimin.

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