

original scientific article  
received: 2015-04-03

UDC 392.72:821.214.09Tagore

## HOSPITALITY IN COLONIAL INDIA: ANCIENT LEGACY, MODERN TOOL OF RESISTANCE

Ana JELNIKAR

University of Primorska, Science and Research Centre, Institute for Philosophical Studies  
Garibaldijeva 1, 6000 Koper, Slovenija  
e-mail: ana.jelnikar@zrs.upr.si

### ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the understudied link between hospitality and anti-colonial dissent in British India of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. More precisely, with reference to India's foremost writer and international figure, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), it investigates how during colonial times, hospitality, as the welcoming of a guest (either as friend or enemy), became an embattled concept of emancipation in its relation with distant and close 'others'. It suggests that the discourse of hospitality was a part of the urgent reappraisal and refashioning of the 'Indian self' under the trying circumstances of political and cultural subjugation.*

**Keywords:** hospitality, anti-colonial resistance, Rabindranath Tagore, alternative modernity, the Upanishads

## OSPITALITÀ NELL'INDIA COLONIALE: EREDITÀ ANTICA, STRUMENTO MODERNO DELLA RESISTENZA

### SINTESI

*Questo saggio esplora il collegamento non studiato tra l'ospitalità ed il dissenso anticoloniale nell'India britannica della seconda metà del XIX° e la prima metà del XX° secolo. Più precisamente, referendosi al principale scrittore e la figura internazionale di Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), indaga su come, nei tempi di colonialismo, l'ospitalità tale atto di accogliere l'ospite (amico o nemico che sia), divenne un concetto rinforzato d'emancipazione in relazione agli "altri" distanti e vicini. Suggestisce che il discorso d'ospitalità faceva parte della rivalutazione urgente e della rielaborazione dell' "Indiano stesso" nelle esigenti circostanze della sottomissione politica e culturale.*

**Parole chiave:** ospitalità, resistenza anticoloniale, Rabindranath Tagore, modernità alternativa, Upanisad

INTRODUCTION: HOSPITALITY  
AND ANTI-COLONIAL DISSENT

Over the last two decades, hospitality has emerged as a category across disciplines for addressing a variety of issues associated with the welcome of the stranger. It has been considered in a range of contexts, most prominently in international relations, immigration policies, asylum and refugee crises, tourism, travel, as part of various interdisciplinary approaches in the humanities and social sciences alike. Broadly defined as the receiving and welcoming of a stranger, it has also marked a crucial intervention in thinking about new cosmopolitan ethics in the contemporary globalized world (Derrida, 2001; Benhabib, 2006; Baker, 2009; Baker (ed.), 2013). Most influentially, Jacques Derrida has conceptualized a notion of *radical* or *unconditional* hospitality in the 1990s and placed it at the heart of a welcoming cosmopolitanism. His is a trenchant critique of the way in which hospitality is offered in the modern world, strictly regulated by the state and its normative restrictions policing the movement of the so-called ‘foreigners’ across national boundaries. In current discussions, the notion is thus commonly attached to the experience of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Indeed, a growing body of works testifies to the fact that hospitality is re-emerging as a valuable notion in political philosophy and international relations. Gideon Baker has recently argued that hospitality, analytically speaking, “provides a new framework for understanding many of the challenges in world politics today” (Baker (ed.), 2013, 1). The ‘guest’ these various approaches are concerned with, however, is most often either a refugee seeking sanctuary, or an impoverished immigrant, or a job-seeking worker or simply a European tourist – all in need of a better welcome by a host country. The reverse topic of the historically abusive guests in the form of ‘colonizers’ and the welcoming response of the host in the form of ‘the colonized’ has on the other hand received much less scholarly attention.

This paper presents an attempt to investigate the nature and role of hospitality in the specific context of British colonialism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial India through the voice of India’s foremost poet and international figure, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). I will try to show that hospitality as an ancient legacy became an embattled concept of emancipation under the aegis of the modern Empire and was part of the larger reappraisal and refashioning of the ‘Indian self’ in the face of trying political conditions. The idea is to link the notion of hospitality to strategies of (post-) colonial dissent, and to show that hospitality for Tagore, seen as an ancient legacy, became a highly relevant concept for his cosmopolitan/universalist ideal.

To this day, hospitality is invoked across South Asia as a virtue and a distinctive mark of its cultures. The old Upanishadic saying ‘atithidev bhavah’ (lit. treat thy

guest as god), which likens the guest (*atithi*) to a god, has recently been turned into a slogan for promoting tourism by India’s hospitality industry. However, in contrast to this superficial celebratory use in the context of market-based, consumerist cosmopolitanism, this same guest-centric maxim was invoked by Tagore in the 1920s in the constitution of his international university Visva-Bharati founded explicitly with the idea to host people and knowledge systems from all over the world. Given the precarious setting of early 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial India, this was as much a gesture against colonialism and its prescriptive education as it was a bold alternative to it.

The notion of modern-day colonialism as abuse of native hospitality is not new in itself. Already Kant condemned colonialism in Asia and elsewhere as “a strong abuse of cosmopolitan hospitality” and “a major obstacle to perpetual peace” (Giesen, Author’s copy, 762). Indeed, Kant castigated the East India Company’s economic venture as “a flagrant offence to hospitality granted to Europeans” (758). Even before Kant, and in the context of early 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish colonization of ‘the New World’, the Spanish philosopher and theologian Francisco de Vitoria questioned the basis of Spanish conquest as a right to hospitality when harm is done to the natives (Baker, 2013a, 44ff). In this scenario, the guest has the right of entry and protection but he should be benign and not abuse his powers. In this both Kant and Vitoria built on the primordial premise of all human beings sharing the right to the common possession of the earth, well before the globe was carved up into nations. A century later, Tagore used the same argument from a structurally weaker position of a colonized subject to articulate his anti-nationalist and deterritorialized conception of India as a place of paramount hospitality, where everyone was welcome, including the British (Tagore, 1961, 133). The primary source of Tagore’s radical ethics of hospitality was, however, not modern Western philosophy, but rather the classical Upanishads, as they were rediscovered by the religious and social movement of the Brahmo Samaj of the 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century colonial Bengal. Tagore, in turn, gave the concept a modern-day oppositional interpretation intended to bolster a vision of individual and social liberation. Hospitality and anti-colonial dissent became unexpected bed fellows.

TAGORE’S COSMOPOLITAN VISION  
AND AN ALTERNATIVE MODERNITY

The nineteenth- and early-twentieth- centuries in colonial Bengal (and India) was a time of unprecedented social change and unrest, marked by a transition from the feudal-religious into the secular world of Indian modernity under increasing pressures of the British colonial rule. The new English-educated middle classes found themselves negotiating European influences at every

level of social life, in the process giving rise to new paradigms of consciousness (historical, national, religious, and literary). In the ensuing period of great intellectual ferment, known as the 'Bengal Renaissance', ancient sources ranging from the Upanishads to Buddhist texts were plumbed afresh to articulate a new 'Indian' identity that was at once oppositional (different) and 'universal'. Drawing primarily on the ancient Upanishadic ideal of the guest as divine, Tagore – considered the foremost representative of this intellectual efflorescence – strove to refashion an ancient notion of hospitality into a *modern tool of resistance*, and use it to oppose colonial, nationalist, religious and patriarchal hegemonies.

Tagore, however, did not expound on the theme of hospitality in any systematic way in his writings, but the idea figures amply in both his creative and non-fictional works. In this paper, I will be considering examples from his essays, foreign addresses as well as works of fiction, particularly the novels of *Gora* (1910) and *Ghare-baire / Home and the World* (1915/6), which in my reading are both hospitality tales *par excellence* or rather, lessons in hospitality. Hospitality for Tagore was a sign of civilization and he placed it at the core of a universalist philosophy intended as an alternative anti-colonial response to the then dominant strain of political and cultural nationalisms (cf. Jelnikar, 2012; 2012a).

In the 1920s, Tagore wrote these paradigmatic lines: "The true universalism is not the breaking down of the walls of one's own house, but the offering of hospitality to one's guests and neighbours." (Tagore, 1996, 75) Presumably, if the British were 'guests', then Muslims and Hindus, the two largest communities in Bengal, were each other's 'neighbours', and therefore all connected through this notion of hospitality. Of course, Muslims were once (usurping) guests too, as had been Aryans before them, but having stayed, they turned themselves into potential hosts. "True" universalism that Tagore upholds is thus emphatically a *welcoming gesture of hospitality* and stance towards both foreigners *and* neighbours. This stance informed his life's social commitments, his pioneering education experiments and it is also a theme that runs through his work as a creative writer.

Although foremost a poet, Tagore devoted half of his life to an experiment in education. Deeply dissatisfied with the existing colonial system of education, which in his view produced parrots rather than independently thinking and feeling individuals, Tagore

decided to set up an alternative schooling system that would be rooted in one's immediate natural and cultural environment, but capable of branching out to the wider world. In 1918 in Santiniketan, he founded the international university Visva-Bharati with the vision to promote a coordinated study of India's cultures (Vedic, Puranic, Buddhist, Jain, Islamic, Sikh, Zoroastrian) alongside other Asian and European knowledge systems and languages (Tagore, 1961a, 220; O'Connell, 2002). As already mentioned, in the making of the university's constitution, Tagore used the phrase *atithi deba bhavo*, which likens the guest to the divine, so as to underline his intention to make Visva-Bharati a meeting place where people from all over the world would receive generous hospitality and share their perspectives in what would be a self-critical exchange of ideas. Its motto in Sanskrit, *Yatra vishvam bhavatyeka nidam*, meaning 'where the world becomes one nest', further suggests a development of intimate ties between the various cultures/guests of the world. Arguably then, Visva-Bharati was Tagore's most *concrete* expression of a hospitality ethos. It was also a protest of sorts against what he felt was an increasingly inhospitable world driven by greed and selfishness.

Indeed, hospitality can be seen to connect with Tagore's vision of an alternative modernity, one in which nationalism is rejected as a potential culture-political emancipatory force even as an anti-colonial stance is upheld (cf. Jelnikar, 2012). When Tagore saw how the first popular anti-colonial movement in India 'Swadeshi'<sup>1</sup> aligned itself with Hindu revivalism, giving rise to communal violence, he became suspicious of the nationalists' motives. He questioned the 'patriotic' credentials of nationalists who would readily tread over the lives of the Muslim and Hindu poor (their own people) in pursuit of their swadeshi goals: "Your main motive is hatred of the foreigner, not love of country." (Tagore, letter to Gandhi, in Bhattacharya (ed.) 2005, 70) As self-appointed guardians of 'country' or 'nation', they have made hatred the propeller for social change, as opposed to love, as Tagore was proposing. Furthermore, they also betrayed what Tagore upheld as a venerable tradition of Indian or Asian hospitality. As he said to the Japanese in a lecture delivered in Tokyo in May 1929, "Hospitality to distant races should be an expression of patriotism for one's own country". (Tagore, 2001, 608) But can one teach hospitality? Can hospitality even be turned into

1 *Swadesh* literally means 'of our own country'; The Swadeshi movement was the first large-scale popular anti-colonial movement in India, sparked off by Lord Curzon's decision to partition Bengal in 1905 into into eastern and western provinces along religious lines. The official argument was administrative – the province of Bengal was too large to be efficiently run – and though there were genuine administrative considerations, the real reason was political. It arose out of a pressing need to undermine growing nationalism in Bengal; Bengali professional class, represented predominantly by Hindus, were the most articulate political voice at the time. For the first time too, Indian politics saw the emergence of organized urban terrorism. A time of great political turmoil, affecting all segments of society including the rural areas, the Partition of Bengal in 1905 and its aftermath came to occupy something of a landmark in Tagore's life. Many of his most compelling literary works arose out of his engagement with this particular moment in India's history. For a seminal study of the movement, cf. Sarkar, 1973.

a transforming social force?<sup>2</sup> And what kind of hospitality exactly are we talking about here? Patriotic love of one's country, Tagore would caution elsewhere, is readily turned into a menacing, destructive force, set on assimilating and annulling the difference of weaker sections of society.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, the education he had in mind was meant to fight "against the education which teaches that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity" (Tagore, 2001, 456). His educational efforts thus staged the possibilities for hospitable *other-directed* and *other-sensitive* love, where personal freedom and individuality were guarded and empathy towards 'others' cultivated.<sup>4</sup>

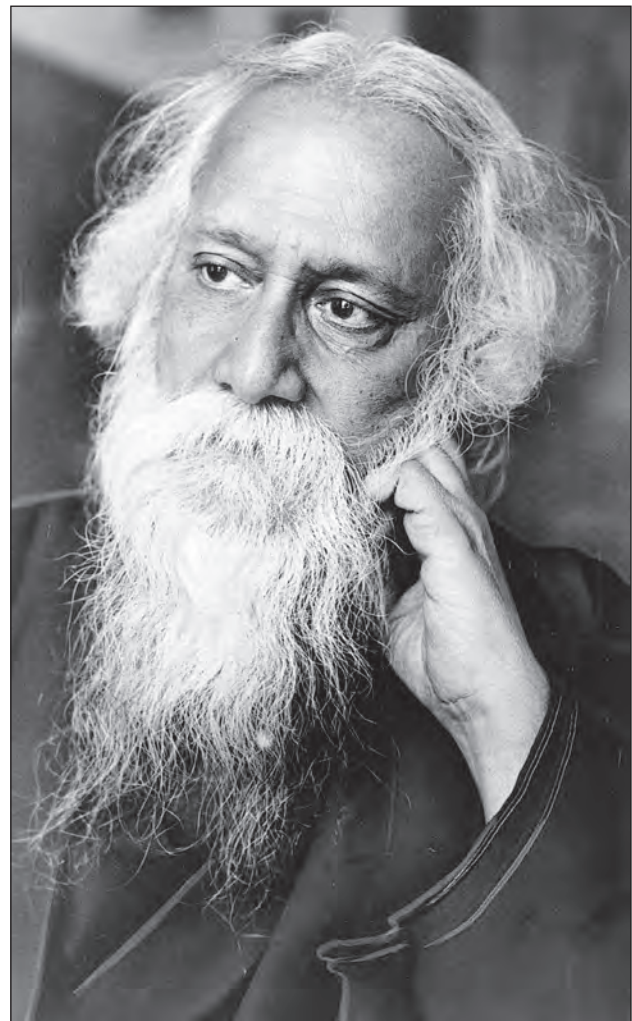
The oppositionality attached to hospitality that emerges here – and one that we will probe further – turns therefore on the connection between nationalism and hospitality, whereby hospitality runs counter to a separatist nationalist outlook. But unlike nationalism, can hospitality be mobilized as an effective force for social change? And if so, are there any dangers? As ideas of the modern nation state rise in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can anticipate the ancient notion of a right of strangers to a welcome to come into conflict with the right of hosts to refuse this claim and assert rather their sovereignty over their territorial domain.

#### DECONSTRUCTING (NATIONAL) IDENTITIES

It is easy to imagine Tagore's welcoming cosmopolitanism or openness to an uninvited stranger to jar with a nationalist point of view. Time and again Tagore would interrogate the cultural and territorial boundaries of India and subjecthood. In 1908 in an address to his students in Santiniketan, later published as 'East and West', he challenged received notions of 'Indianness' and 'India':

*Who are we to say that this country is ours alone? In fact, who is this "We"? Bengali, Marathi, or Punjabi, Hindu or Muslim? Only the larger "We" in whom all these – Hindu and Muslim and British and whoever else there be – must eventually unite, shall have the right to determine what is India and what is of the outside (Tagore, 1961, 133).*

In an age of obligatory nationalisms, in which a country's independence could only be imagined from within the political framework of a nation state (cf. Zachariah, 2011) such a statement was not only provocative but also politically inexpedient and utopian. But Tagore had a different 'India' in mind; the deterritorialized and cul-



**Rabindranath Tagore**

turally unbounded conception of 'India' he was proposing was coextensive with a model of ideal hospitality, in which we are all guests of the earth, with no legitimate claim to exclusive possession of any one part of it. Kant had argued similarly in his treatise *Perpetual Peace* that all human beings shared "the right of common possession of the surface of the earth" (Kant, 2006, 82, cited in Popke, 2007, 509), but what Kant had in mind was a liberal world order based on free and peaceful trade amongst self-determined peoples and their respective citizens (Giesen, Author's copy, 759). Tagore, on the other hand, condemned "the Nation" (the nation-state)

2 I ask these questions inspired by Purushottam Agrawal and his essay on Kabir's ideal of love (2011). Agrawal notes not only a lack of a discourse of love in contemporary social thought but also a reluctance in giving love a space for thinking about social change. It is always hatred that is seen as all-important in the formation of social forces, while love's importance is acknowledged only as a personal impulse.

3 According to my reading (particularly his book *Nationalism*) Tagore opposed patriotism no less than he opposed nationalism. He also, as he famously stated in a letter to C. F. Andrews, disavowed the concept in relation to himself in no uncertain terms: "I love India, but my India is an Idea and not a geographical expression. Therefore, I am *not* a patriot – I shall ever seek my compatriots all over the world. You are one of them and I am sure there are many others (emphasis author's, letter to C. F. Andrews, 1921, in Andrews, 2002, 119).

4 For more on Tagore's concept of education, cf. O'Connell, 2002.



outright, seeing it as the biggest evil modern political civilization has spawned. Defined as a population welded into a political and economic union for the purpose of commercial self-interest, “the Nation”, according to Tagore, generated hatred amongst peoples and drove them to imperialist wars (cf. Tagore, 2001).

The philosopher who comes closer to Tagore on this is, of course, Derrida, whose major contribution is precisely in that, while drawing on Levinas, he critically re-evaluates the long-standing Western philosophical traditions of cosmopolitanism. He takes issue in particular with Kant’s famous articulation of the cosmopolitan right as a right of hospitality, a right of strangers not to be turned away. Against the hegemony of the nation-state and politicization of hospitality, Derrida’s alternative view of cosmopolitanism presents a potential source of hope (Derrida, 2001). His deconstruction of the binary of identity (universalism) and difference (particularism) which continues to plague the debates in thinking about the ‘Other’ (the foreigner, the stranger, the immigrant), has indeed opened up a space where identity (host) and difference (guest) are mutually constitutive in a *lived* experience of cosmopolitanism-as-hospitality (Baker, 2009). Moreover, his favouring of the ‘other’, or his ‘guest-centric’ approach (Baker, 2012), would also destabilize original power structures and make room for previously excluded values.

In that sense, following Derrida, hospitality is never merely about how we relate to others, but primarily about how we relate to ourselves by questioning ‘the self’ as a given. It is this core insight which suggests a *self-transformative* potential of hospitality that can illuminate Tagore’s analytical as well as practical engagements to do with what it meant to be ‘Indian’ in a particular context. Like Derrida’s, Tagore’s ideal of hospitality was far more radical than anything Kant had ever anticipated; it was that of *unconditional* hospitality directed at the guest. In Derrida’s striking formulation:

*Let us say yes to who or what turns up, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another county, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female (emphasis author’s, Derrida, 2000, 77).*

The world we inhabit, according to Derrida, is the world of conditional hospitality. Every act of welcome is premised on the arrival’s more or less strict abeyance to

the rules laid down by the host, the master of the house. Whether in the physical space of one’s home or nation, the guest (the immigrant) must conform to the laws and culture of the host by adopting his – and mainly it is *his* – language, normative behaviour, and cultural mores (Derrida, 2000, 149). Marked by an inherent inequality of positions, host and guest, in this conditional hospitality scenario, only get reasserted in their superior-inferior roles. So, if conditional hospitality can only ever reassert the mastery of the host (on condition you respect my rules), unconditional hospitality, in contrast, destabilizes the hierarchical relations and neat opposition between host and guest. It demands that the self be unsettled and questioned by the welcome of the stranger.

But such *pure* hospitality that opens the door to anyone (or anything) and defies expectations of reciprocity belongs to the realm of the impossible. Not only does unconditional hospitality not exist in this world, but it is impossible even on the level of the conceptual ideal, because when pushed to the extreme, hospitality makes an impossible demand: that I give up my home in the process of this unconditional opening it up. But without a home to offer hospitality there can be no hospitality as such, nor can hospitality exist without a stranger or a guest; a somebody with a face and a name. This paradox at the heart of Derrida’s ethics of hospitality, the “double bind” or pull of two inseparable and yet opposing imperatives (one asking us to offer hospitality ungrudgingly to anyone, and the other to limit it so as to protect the boundaries which are the condition for hospitality itself) is inherent to any act of hospitality. Its value is in that it sets a process of responsibility in motion in which we are asked to “decide *uniquely* and singularly each time how to limit, and how much to limit, unconditional hospitality” (emphasis author’s, Baker, 2009a: 53). The evocation of the unconditional (true) spirit of hospitality in short asks us to question the laws of conditional hospitality, at the same time it suggests “the welcoming of the other as Other” (52).

There is indeed something almost perverse about hospitality which demands of us to endure the possibility of being deprived of a home. It is also terrible in that it does not protect us from the possibility that the other could colonize me: “I have to accept if I offer unconditional hospitality that the Other may ruin my own space or impose his or her own culture or his or her own language.” (Derrida in Bennington, 1997) Obviously, hospitality is something that needs to be negotiated every time anew; it is a risky business and requires invention.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, Tagore was intellectually equipped to deal with even such a preposterous proposition as to give up

5 The issue of the colonizer’s language presents an interesting case in point. The fact that Indians adopted (and adapted) English as their own language is still often framed as an instance of denationalized surrender or betrayal on the part of the English educated elite. Seeing the problematic in the light of unconditional hospitality and a measure of assimilation anticipated on the part of the host – we should not forget that it was Indians themselves who asked for English education as early as 1817 – would shift the accent away from such a reductive view.

one's home: "According to India's ideal, even the home must be given up in due course, in quest of the Infinite". (Tagore, 1961, 137) This brings us to the question of the cultural sources on which Tagore drew for his notion of 'unconditional' hospitality.

#### ANCIENT SOURCES RECLAIMED

The offering of shelter to a stranger whose identity is uncertain and who could potentially endanger one's household, and the subsequent reward for one's ungrudging act of hospitality, are the classic ingredients of hospitality tales found in ancient Sanskrit literature. "Hostly forbearance will bring a divine reward." (Jamison, 1996, 169, on ancient Indian hospitality ethos, cf. also George, 2009) The potential benefits of providing a welcome to vulnerable strangers, because they may be divine messengers in disguise, is a theme Tagore exploits in a number of his literary works, most memorably perhaps in his novel *Gora*, in which the central protagonist *Gora* lives because his adoptive mother Anandamoyi fearlessly opened the door in the middle of the night to a white woman fleeing the Sepoys at a time of all-round killings, giving her a shelter against the advice of her less generous husband. The woman dies just after giving birth to a white boy. The fair "orphaned boy", as barren Anandamoyi impressed on her sceptical husband, was no less than "a gift from [her] deity" (Tagore, 2009, 31). But even as Tagore alludes to the ancient Sanskrit tales of the guest as divinity in disguise, it is clear at the start of the novel that Anandamoyi's deity is the non-sectarian god of humanity or broadly defined humanism (a deity of all castes), to which Tagore himself subscribed, drawing on humanist traditions of India as well as Europe.

Tagore's classic vocabulary of hospitality, I want to suggest, has already been filtered through the religious reformist Brahmo Samaj movement of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Bengal which Tagore's father had revived and made available for his son's creative use. The movement was started in 1882 by Rammohun Roy (1772-1833), who is often referred to as the 'father' of modern India, and whose religious universalism was combined with a strong reformist bent, bringing to the table, alongside opposition to the caste system, idol worship and the Hindu orthodoxy, also the question of women's rights and education. Its reformist spiritualism, or Brahmo universalism (cf. Kopf 1988), owed something to Protestant Christianity, particularly the Unitarians, as it sought a return to the original philosophical monotheism of the Vedas and the Upanishads,<sup>6</sup> and was dedicated to "the worship of a universal and formless Divinity that informs all life and being" (Kripalani, 2001, 7).

Therefore, when in his writings Tagore upholds the concept of *dharma*, which he defines as something "inherent in the nature of Man the Eternal", "the universal Man" (Tagore, 2000, 81), and relates it to the duty of hospitality, he is in fact evoking the transcendent absolute of the Upanishads, the all-encompassing divine force that is inclusive of everyone and everything. It is this *universal* dharma that guides Anandamoyi's generous behaviour, as opposed to a particularist dharma pertaining to her caste or familial status. The precept that all individual souls are ultimately identical in Brahman is the key notion out of which Tagore's oppositional thinking flowed (against caste, gender inequality, etc.) The self and other were no enemies, merely different expressions of the same infinite being (so everyone has the right of entry and is welcome). It also informed his paradoxical *hospitable* anti-colonial stance. "To be absolutely simple in one's hospitality to one's enemy, or to a stranger, required generations of training" (84), said Tagore to a Western audience in Oxford in 1930, upholding generous hospitality as a mark of Indian civilization.

In my reading of the novel *Gora*, I have shown how the journey of self discovery of the eponymous character from his misguided aggressive Hindu nationalist identity to someone proclaiming at the end – "Today, I belong to every community of this Bharatvarsha, I accept everyone's food as mine..." – an expression of absolute hospitality *par excellence* – is precisely a journey of ultimately accepting hospitality from the enemy. This journey can be traced through *transformative* hospitality encounters; briefly, *Gora* can be seen to evolve from initially rejecting hospitality in Poreshbabu's Brahmo's household which he perceives as a threat to his guarded sense of identity, to seeking hospitality in lower-class homes so as to establish a sense of community with the disenfranchised and the oppressed, to finally, when he is put into the magistrate's prison, as he himself writes in his letter to Anandamoyi, "accept(ing) the *hospitality* offered by the prison" – accepting hospitality from his *enemy*. This is the point when *Gora* is ready to accept the facts of his foreign birth, which blows his constructed sense of identity to smithereens and sets him free. Moreover, in what is a powerful trope of the stranger at home or the enemy within, Tagore, with the character of *Gora*, suggests how the 'other' does not have to be an external menacing presence but can become an integral part of an enlarged self.<sup>7</sup> (cf. Jelnikar, forthcoming)

In reclaiming an ancient hospitality ethos, Tagore also drew on the classical Hindu discipline of ashramas (*Varnashrama Dharma*) or the four stages of life traditionally prescribed for a Hindu way of life, where the householder stage or *Grihasta* is considered to be the most

6 For more on how Hindu (Vedanta) religious modernity became the first vehicle of ideological modernity in India as well as the parallels between the Christian Reformation and the nineteenth-century Indian intelligentsia's rediscovery and reinterpretation of Vedanta, cf. Van Biljert 2003 and 2009.

7 "The West has come into our homes and we cannot turn it out like an unwelcome guest," Tagore 1961, 136.

important ashrama for the society at large on account of its socially-orientated values. Of the five great devotional acts the Hindu householder was expected to perform, Manushyajna mandated the giving of ungrudging hospitality to guests as an expression of human brotherhood. The character of Nikhilesh, for example, the enlightened householder of the novel *Chare baire/Home and the World* (1916), upholds this ideal even as these classical notions are already merged with the Brahmo theology or “bourgeois Hinduism” (Hatcher, 2008) that strove to reconcile the worldly and the earthly with the divine purpose. If we want to understand the surprising fact of Nikhilesh’s inability to throw the usurping guest out of his house, we need to pay attention to the Brahmo householder ethics and its hospitality mandate.

*The novel Chare-baire*, is also essentially a novel about hospitality, more precisely the question of limiting hospitality against an ideal which tells us otherwise.<sup>8</sup> The plot is simple enough: a man is invited into the home of his friend, introduced to his wife, and allowed to stay on as a guest. What follows is an unleashing of passions that threaten to tear apart the private and social fabric of the household. Once Sandip becomes the household’s guest and Bimala given to crossing the threshold of the inner quarters to which women of the upper class were confined at the time, the ‘world’ comes flooding in, in ways which affect and change all of the three main protagonists. Hospitality is fraught with danger, and the question that presents itself forcefully here is: If the code of conduct demands to welcome the stranger, either as friend or enemy, what does one do when the host gets blatantly abused; or, put differently, when the guest becomes a usurping guest, a parasite, a *Sandip*, eventually turning the host into a stranger in their own house or home? The fact that husband Nikhilesh has no illusions about Sandip’s increasingly harmful presence in his house, but will *not* resort to throwing him out – though eventually he does ask him to leave – in other words, the idea that something is no less legitimate because it is in some way harmful, captures *the unbearable fix* of unconditional hospitality – the contrasting pulls of two opposing forces, in which one demands we honour a hospitality ethos while the other suggests we protect ourselves and our home. It is, of course, tempting to read this hospitality tale also as an allegory of the colonial encounter. India’s historically different answers to British colonization have moved, schematically speaking, anywhere between Gandhi’s ‘Quit India’ movement and Tagore’s radical insistence that the doors remain open. Once again, all accounts of hospitality are built unsteadily upon the tension between a right of strangers to a welcome and a right of hosts to their domain (Baker 2013, 12).

Tagore clearly understood the tensions and paradoxes inherent in any act of hospitality, as he also understood

the fact that colonialism is, in a sense, flagrant abuse of native hospitality. “Do you not see how man is creating suffering, tightening the bonds of slavery on weaker nations, *exploiting hospitality and kindness for cruel diplomacy?*” asked Tagore in an address he gave in Teheran in 1932 (published on Bichitra: Online Tagore Varorium, [http://bichitra.jdvu.ac.in/search/english\\_search.php](http://bichitra.jdvu.ac.in/search/english_search.php), 6. 7. 2014). There seems to also be a suggestion here that it is the weaker nations that are hospitable and kind. While in his aptitude as a reformer Tagore criticized, most strongly and consistently, many aspects to India’s everyday social realities, recognizing in them the same discriminating and unjust forces at work as existed in imperialist nations, but when it came to hospitality, he upheld this as something of India’s forte:

*India’s special genius has been to acknowledge the divine in human affairs, to offer hospitality to all that is imperishable in human civilization, regardless of racial and national divergence. From the early dawn of our history it has been India’s privilege and also its problem, as a host, to harmonize the diverse elements of humanity which have inevitably been brought to our midst, to synthesize contrasting cultures in the light of a comprehensive ideal (Tagore, 2002d, 667).*

“India” for Tagore was a world in miniature precisely because of a tradition of hospitality that he was hoping to re-actualize for his time. To what extent this tradition was imagined or imaginary is subject for another debate; what I wish to underline here is simply the dynamics of harnessing cultural resources of a re-fashioned past for the purpose of envisioning a more humane, hospitable future, not just for India but for the world at large. In many of his addresses across the globe (but particularly across Asia), Tagore would appeal to an ideal of hospitality that he projected as a mark of true civilization and under threat if not already destroyed by the exigencies of the fast-changing modern world. With more than a hint of nostalgia, he would say:

*There was a time when our lives were simpler, when the spirit of the people was hospitable. This spirit has been overcome by the spirit of the Nation, with its intense consciousness of self-interest concentrated in political organisation. Such an unlimited cultivation of over-consciousness of self by the whole people, must inevitably produce its harvest of suspicion, hatred and inhospitable exclusiveness. (Tagore, 2002b, 526).*

Suspicion, hatred and inhospitable exclusiveness is precisely what Derrida, almost a century later, objected

<sup>8</sup> I write about this at much greater length in as yet unpublished paper entitled, ‘Hospitality and Worldliness: Tagore’s Household Drama of Love and Responsibility’.



to in the way (in)hospitality is offered in the contemporary world to designated 'others'. Against this, and like Derrida vis-à-vis Europeans, Tagore would entreat the people of Japan to imagine adopting an alternative counter-nationalist/inhospitable scenario: "This is a time for you to be generous in your hospitality, the merit of which virtue is acknowledged by all peoples of the East" (Tagore, 2001, 68).

From these and other examples, there emerges an identifiable strategy, whereby an idealized version of – a 'pre-modern'/'Eastern' – hospitality is recuperated and harnessed to a universalist project of self-emancipation. There is certainly an element of a romantic retrospective gaze at work here as well as essentializing or conflating of a particular Bengali Brahmo-derived response with "Easternness", which stand uneasily alongside Tagore's otherwise more discriminating take on India's colonial modernity and its past(s).

### CONCLUSION

What I have tried to think about in this paper with the example of Rabindranath Tagore is the underexplored connection between colonialism, hospitality and anti-colonial resistance, showing how a particular version of ideal hospitality gained currency in colonial Bengal of

the late-19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century to counter both imperialist and nationalist discourses. Derrida's notions of hospitality have provided the analytical tool for exploring the tensions between *unconditional* ideals of hospitality encapsulated by the idea of the guest as god, and *conditional* hospitality delimited by restrictions of caste, class, religion and gender, which inform India's everyday laws of hospitality. In their every-day practices of (in)hospitality, Tagore did not want his compatriots to forget the ideal of guest-centric hospitality that gives the new arrival or stranger a more prominent place in the hospitality scenario: "We must use our social strength, not to guard ourselves against the touch of others, considering it as contamination, but generously to extend hospitality to the world, taking all its risks, however numerous and grave" (Tagore, 2002c, 465). Tagore's projected ideal of unconditional hospitality, however, must be seen not so much as an endangered species of traditional hospitality as an idealistic construct, or a constructed ideal, which is itself a product of an embattled colonial modernity. It can be related to a particular philosophical response to the larger question of freedom and selfhood against the conflicting cross-currents of modernization, westernization and reinterpreted Hindu traditions which Tagore had inherited as a Brahmo and took forward in his own way.



*Dance performance in Santiniketan*



GOSTOLJUBJE V KOLONIALNI INDIJI: STARODAVNO IZROČILO,  
MODERNO ORODJE ODORA

Ana JELNIKAR

Univerza na Primorskem, Znanstveno-raziskovalno središče, Inštitut za filozofske študije  
Garibaldijeva 1, 6000 Koper, Slovenija  
e-mail: ana.jelnikar@zrs.upr.si

## POVZETEK

V članku avtorica raziskuje pojem in diskurz gostoljubja v kontekstu Britanske Indije v drugi polovici 19. stoletja skozi dela enega mednarodno najbolj uglednih indijskih pesnikov in pisateljev Rabindranatha Tagoreja (1861-1941). Ugotavlja povezavo med gostoljubjem in protikolonialnim odporom, pri čemer v pojmu gostoljubja prepozna ključ k razumevanju Tagorejeve radikalne alternative za sodobno Indijo, ki bi se namesto k nacionalizmu kot sili, s katero se zoperstaviti politično-kulturni represiji, raje zatekla k 'brezpogojnemu' gostoljubju in odprla vrata slehernemu 'gostu'. Analitično si avtorica sposodi konceptualno orodje pri Jacquesu Derridaju, ki je s svojimi pojmi (brez)pogojnega gostoljubja ključno zaznamoval aktualne razprave o gostoljubju tako v družbenih vedah kot humanistiki. Derridajev radikalni koncept brezpogojnega gostoljubja je moč primerjati s Tagorejevim idealom gostoljubja. Ta ideal – čigar idejne korenine najdemo v Upanišadah, kot jih je preinterpretiralo gibanje Brahma samaj – moramo razumeti tako v odnosu do Tagorejevih praktičnih pedagoških iniciativ kot do njegovega literarnega ustvarjanja, pri čemer romana *Gora* in *Dom* in svet zavzemata posebno mesto. Naposled avtorica pokaže, kako Tagore svoje specifično razumevanje gostoljubja, v katerem prepozna starodavno izročilo, uporabi kot moderno orodje odpora v težkih zgodovinskih pogojih.

**Ključne besede:** gostoljubje, protikolonialni odpor, Rabindranath Tagore, alternativna modernost, Upanišade

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andrews, C. F. (ed.) (2002):** Letters to a Friend: Rabindranath Tagore's Letters to C. F. Andrews. New Delhi, Rupa & Co.
- Agrawal, P. (2011):** The Erotic to the Divine. Kabir's Notion of Love and Femininity. In Panjabi, K. (ed.) Poetics and Politics of Sufism and Bhakti in South Asia. Orient BlackSwan. New Delhi, 55–82.
- Appiah, K. A. (2006):** Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers. New York, W. W. Norton.
- Baker, G. (ed.) (2013):** Hospitality and World Politics. Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Baker, G. (2009):** Cosmopolitanism as Hospitality: Revisiting Identity and Difference. *Alternatives* 34, 107–28.
- Baker, G. (2009a):** The Politics of Hospitality. Sovereignty and Ethics in Political Community. In Baker, G. & J. Bartelson (eds.): *The Future of Political Community*. London and New York, Routledge, 51–70.
- Bennington, G. (1997):** Politics and Friendship. A Discussion with Jacques Derrida. Centre for Modern French Thought, University of Sussex. 1 December. <http://www.livingphilosophy.org/Derrida-politics-friendship.htm> (3. 5. 2014).
- Baker, G. (2013):** Introduction. In: Baker, G. (ed.): *Hospitality and World Politics*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 1–17.
- Baker, G. (2013a):** Right of Entry or Right of Refusal? Hospitality in the Law of Nature and Nations. In: Baker, G. (ed.): *Hospitality and World Politics*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 41–68.
- Baker, N. (2012):** Grace and Favour: Deconstructing Hospitality in The Pilgrim's Progress. In: *The Seventeenth Century*, XXVII, 2, 183–211.
- Bhattacharya, S. (2005):** The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore 1915–1941. New Delhi, National Book Trust.
- Benhabib, S. (2002):** The Claims of Culture. Equality and Diversity in the Global Era. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1999):** Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas. Tr. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Mishale Nass. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Derrida, J. (2000):** *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*. Tr. by Rachel Bowlby, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Derrida, J. (2001):** *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. New York: Routledge.
- Giesen, Klaus-Gerd. (1996):** *Asian Hospitality in Kant's Cosmopolitan Law*. Author's copy, 753–63.
- George, S. K. (2009):** *Hospitality as Openness to the Other: Levinas, Derrida and the Indian Hospitality Ethos*. In *Journal of Human Values*, 15, 1, 29–47.
- Hatcher, A. B. (2008):** *Bourgeois Hinduism, or the Faith of the Modern Vedantists. Rare Discourses from Early Colonial Bengal*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jamison, W. S. (1996):** *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife: Women, Ritual, and Hospitality in Ancient India*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jelnikar, A. (2012):** *Tagore's Universalist Sparks. A Creative Approach*. In Dasgupta, S. & C. Guha (eds.): *Tagore at Home in the World*. New Delhi, Sage Publications, 291–304.
- Jelnikar, A. (2012a):** *Non-Hegemonic Universalism : Rabindranath Tagore's World Vision*. In Khatib, M. L. (ed.): *Sožitje med kulturami : poti do medkulturnega dialoga [Harmony between cultures: ways of attaining a cross-cultural dialogue]*. Maribor: Pivec, 31–50.
- Jelnikar, A. (forthcoming), *Waiting for the Second Cup of Tea: Unconditional Hospitality in Tagore's Novel Gora*. In Bhattacharya, N. (ed.): *Critical Companion to Rabindranath Tagore's Novel Gora*, Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan.
- Kant, I. (2006):** *Towards Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*. Tr. D. Colclasure. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Kripalani, K. (2001):** *Tagore: A Life*. New Delhi, National Book Trust.
- Kopf, D. (1988):** *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*. New Delhi, Archives Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
- O'Connell, K. M. (2002):** *Rabindranath Tagore: The Poet as Educator*. Kolkata, Visva-Bharati.
- O'Gorman, Kevin. (2010) *The Origins of Hospitality and Tourism*. Oxford, Goodfellow Publishers.
- Popke, J. (2007):** *Geography and ethics: spaces of cosmopolitan responsibility*. In: *Progress in Human Geography*, 31, 4, 509–18.
- Sarkar, S. (1973):** *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908*. New Delhi, People's Publishing House.
- Niesen, P. (2007) "Colonialism and Hospitality", *Politics and ethics review*, 3: 1, 90–108.
- Tagore, R. (1961):** *East and West [1908]*. In: Bhattacharya, B. et al (eds.): *Towards Universal Man: Rabindranath Tagore*. London: Asia Publishing House, 129–40.
- Tagore, R. (2002):** *Thoughts from Tagore*. In. Das, S. K. (ed.): *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore. Volume Three: A Miscellany*. New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 29–82.
- Tagore, R. (2002a):** *The Way to Unity*. In Das, S. K. (ed.): *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore. Volume Three: A Miscellany*. New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 459–69.
- Tagore, R. (2002b):** *The Indian Ideal of Marriage*. In Das, S. K. (ed.): *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore. Volume Three: A Miscellany*. New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 524–78.
- Tagore, R. (2002d):** *On Oriental Culture and Japan's Mission [1919]*. In Das, S. K. (ed.): *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore. Volume Three: A Miscellany*. New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 604–10.
- Tagore, R. (2002c):** *Rammohun Roy [1933]*. In Das, S. K. (ed.): *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore. Volume Three: A Miscellany*. New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 667–9.
- Tagore, R. (1996a):** *The Centre of Indian Culture [1919]*. In Bhattacharya, B. et al: *Towards Universal Man: Rabindranath Tagore*. London: Asia Publishing House, 202–30
- Tagore, R. (2001):** *Nationalism [1917]*. In In Das, S. K. (ed.): *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Volume Two, Plays, Stories, Essays*. New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 417–66.
- Tagore, R. (2000):** *The Religion of Man*. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Publishing Department.
- Tagore, R. (2009):** *Gora*. Tr. by Radha Chakravarty. New Delhi, Penguin Books.
- Zachariah, B. (2011):** *Playing the Nation Game. The Ambiguities of Nationalism in India*. New Delhi, Yoda Press.