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Problematising morality: Approaching Tagore's "Nationalism in India" from the discourse of "Beyond"

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Abstract
This article explores the intersection of morality, nationalism, and caste in modern Indian political thought by placing Rabindranath Tagore's Nationalism in India (1917) in critical dialogue with Gopal Guru's the Idea of India: Derivative, Desi and Beyond (2011). Though separated by time, context, and social location, both thinkers articulate critiques of nationalism that question its moral sufficiency. Tagore, a cosmopolitan poet-philosopher, condemns the mechanistic, materialist nationalism of the West and advocates for a universal humanism rooted in spiritual and civilizational values. Guru, a leading Dalit philosopher, challenges the Brahmanical underpinnings of Indian nationalism and calls for a moral discourse rooted in caste consciousness, subaltern experience, and the radical political thought of Phule and Ambedkar.
This paper argues that while Tagore and Guru differ significantly in tone and framework, they converge in viewing nationalism as an inadequate moral project. Both advocate for a movement "beyond" the nation—Tagore through love and spiritual unity, Guru through epistemic rupture and social justice. Their respective visions offer critical insights into ethical pluralism, resistance, and the need to reimagine India's moral foundations. The essay ultimately suggests that a comparative reading of Tagore and Guru does not offer reconciliation, but rather a productive tension that illuminates the complex terrain of Indian identity, morality, and democratic imagination.

Keywords: Tagore, Gopal Guru, Indian nationalism, morality, caste, dalit thought, Ambedkar, Phule

Introduction

This essay seeks to interrogate the complex entanglement of morality, nationalism, and caste by placing Rabindranath Tagore's Nationalism in India (1917) in critical dialogue with Gopal Guru's the Idea of India: Derivative, Desi and Beyond (2011). Despite the significant temporal and ideological distance between these two thinkers—Tagore writing during the early 20th century against the backdrop of colonial rule and the First World War, and Guru writing in the second decade of the 21st century within the postcolonial, democratic Indian polity—both offer incisive critiques of the dominant forms of Indian nationalism. What unites their perspectives, despite their divergent philosophical and political orientations, is a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the nation as it has been imagined and enacted in the Indian context.

Tagore, situated within the colonial era, was profoundly troubled by the growing tendency to mimic Western forms of the nation-state, particularly their emphasis on militarism, industrial growth, and national egoism. His critique of nationalism is not merely political but moral; he contends that nationalism, in its Western guise, leads to the suppression of individuality and the corrosion of spiritual values. In his view, a nation devoid of moral and ethical grounding becomes an instrument of oppression rather than liberation. His call, therefore, is for a form of moral nationalism that transcends narrow political boundaries and embraces a spiritual humanism grounded in empathy and universalism.

Guru, on the other hand, emerges from a critical Dalit intellectual tradition that draws on the legacy of thinkers like Jyotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar. His critique targets not only the colonial legacy of the Indian nation-state but also the internal exclusions that have defined its postcolonial articulation. For Guru, nationalism in India has historically been shaped by upper-caste, Brahmanical elites who have monopolised the discourse of unity and identity while systematically erasing or marginalising Dalit voices. In his analysis, the moral vacuum of Indian nationalism is not due to a lack of spiritual values, as Tagore suggests, but because of its inability to confront and dismantle caste hierarchies that remain embedded in its ideological and institutional foundations.

This paper argues that the concept of morality, as articulated by both Tagore and Guru, serves as a discursive axis around which their critiques revolve. However, morality here is not to be understood merely in terms of personal virtue or religious piety; rather, it is a political and epistemological tool—a mode of critiquing structures of power and imagining alternative futures. Tagore's morality is informed by the Brahmo-Samaj reformist tradition and is universalist in scope, whereas Guru's morality is grounded in the lived experience of caste oppression and aims at epistemic justice and social transformation.

By foregrounding the concept of the "beyond"—a term Guru uses to signify the rupture with both colonial and Brahmanical frameworks of nationalism—this essay explores how both thinkers attempt to open up a space for critical self-reflection and alternative imaginings of Indian identity. The "beyond" is not merely a spatial or temporal gesture but a theoretical one: it invites us to move past the derivative models of nationalism imposed during colonial modernity as well as the desi traditionalism that seeks to sanitise the caste question. It is in this shared ambition to transcend the mechanical, exclusionary, and morally impoverished forms of nationalism that Tagore and Guru become unlikely interlocutors in India's ongoing struggle to define itself.

Tagore's Moral Nationalism: A Critique of Mechanisation

Rabindranath Tagore's Nationalism in India (1917) presents a penetrating critique of nationalism, not simply as a political phenomenon, but as a profound moral crisis. Written during a period of global upheaval—the First World War, the rise of militaristic Japan, and intensifying anti-colonial movements in India—Tagore's essay positions itself against the increasingly dominant ideology of nation-worship that had begun to permeate Indian political consciousness. His unease with nationalism was not limited to the Western world; rather, he saw its effects increasingly taking root within India itself through movements like Swadeshi, which he believed carried the seeds of aggressive parochialism and ethical decline.

Central to Tagore's rejection of nationalism is his conceptualisation of the nation as a "mechanical" force. In his words:

"The Nation is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organised for a mechanical purpose" (Tagore 1918, 58).

This mechanisation, Tagore argued, undermines the organic moral life of a people. It privileges efficiency, power, and competition over empathy, creativity, and spiritual unity. In this sense, nationalism does not liberate—it enslaves. It turns people into instruments of the state, eroding their moral agency and reducing their existence to that of cogs in an imperialist machine. He saw in nationalism the logic of the industrial order—standardised, coercive, and ultimately dehumanising.

Tagore's alternative was not a romantic withdrawal from politics, as some critics have suggested, but a profound re-imagination of what constitutes political life. He called for a politics rooted in moral consciousness, where the spiritual unity of humanity took precedence over territorial sovereignty. His invocation of love, sympathy, and fellow-feeling as political virtues was not naïve idealism, but an attempt to establish a counter-ethics to the violent, competitive, and exploitative ethics of nationalism. He famously warned:

"Those who are gifted with the moral power of love and vision of spiritual unity. will be the fittest to take their permanent place in the age that is lying before us" (Tagore 1918, 91).

Tagore's emphasis on morality must be understood within his broader engagement with Brahmo Samaj philosophy and Upanishadic universalism, both of which stressed inner transformation as a precondition for social change. His vision of India was not a sovereign nation-state carved out through struggle, but a moral civilisation, a spiritual experiment in living together across difference. This India was already present in the cultural diversity, philosophical plurality, and emotional depth of its people—qualities that nationalism, he believed, could only flatten.

It is important to note that Tagore's discomfort with the nationalist project also stemmed from his perception of its mimetic nature. As Partha Chatterjee (1993) [5] has shown, Indian nationalism often borrowed its institutional forms and legitimising narratives from European models. Tagore was acutely aware of this and argued that the uncritical adoption of Western paradigms would destroy the uniqueness of Indian civilisation. His was a call not for isolation but for dialogue—between East and West, between self and other, between individual and society—mediated by morality rather than power.

Yet, despite the richness of his critique, Tagore's moral nationalism has been faulted for its ambivalence on caste. While he acknowledged the rigidity and ossification of the caste system as socially harmful, he often viewed it as a cultural aberration rather than a structural form of domination. His reluctance to embrace radical social reform, particularly concerning caste hierarchies, makes his moral framework somewhat limited in addressing the depth of India's internal injustices. Gopal Guru and other Dalit intellectuals would later take this critique further, arguing that any moral vision of India that does not centre caste is insufficient and exclusionary.

Nevertheless, Tagore's insistence on morality as the foundation of politics remains a powerful intervention. At a time when nationalist rhetoric continues to rely on binaries of insider/outsider, sacred/profane, and loyalty/treason, Tagore's warning against mechanical nationalism resonates with renewed urgency. His critique invites us to reimagine nationalism not as a sacred ideal but as a historically contingent construct—one that must be subjected to ethical scrutiny and held accountable to the higher values of justice, compassion, and plurality.

Gopal Guru and the Dalit Critique of Nationalism

Where Tagore's critique of nationalism is framed by a concern for spiritual decline and moral decay, Gopal Guru's intervention is rooted in a critique of social exclusion, particularly through the lens of caste. His 2011 essay, The Idea of India: Derivative, Desi and Beyond, challenges the dominant narratives of Indian nationalism by foregrounding the historical and continuing marginalisation of Dalit communities. For Guru, nationalism in India has always been structured by epistemic and social exclusions, sustained by an elite upper-caste consensus that determines the limits of what counts as "India."

Guru's argument begins with a critical assessment of the historical formation of nationalist discourse. He notes that the nation-building project in colonial and postcolonial India has operated through the construction of a "mechanical language of unity", one that invokes tropes such as "Mother India," "Ram Rajya," and "sacred territory" to invoke a homogenised cultural and political identity (Guru 2011) [8]. However, this unity is built on silences—it suppresses caste, it sidelines histories of subaltern resistance, and it refuses to acknowledge the deep structural violence embedded in Hindu social organisation. As Guru writes:

"The nationalistic problematic that emerged during the colonial times has failed to either adequately pose the question of annihilation of caste or sought to completely exclude these social questions" (Guru 2011, 38) [8].

This failure is not accidental; it is constitutive of nationalist discourse. The foundational myths of Indian nationalism were crafted by upper-caste thinkers, who rarely challenged caste hierarchies. In fact, as Guru notes elsewhere, many of them depended on caste for their own social legitimacy. The result is a form of nationalism that is inclusive in rhetoric but exclusionary in structure—a nationalism that denies full citizenship to those at the social margins.

Guru turns to Jyotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar as intellectual forebears of a different moral-political imagination. Both thinkers disrupted the dominant narratives of Indian identity by exposing the violence of caste as central to Indian society. Phule's critique of Brahminical hegemony in religion, education, and social

organisation laid the groundwork for what Guru calls a "negative vocabulary"—a mode of speech that refuses to participate in the harmonious, idealised constructions of the nation. Ambedkar, in turn, radicalised this critique by insisting that caste is fundamentally incompatible with democracy, morality, and nationhood.

In Annihilation of Caste (1936), Ambedkar rejected Hindu reformism and attacked the very foundation of caste as anti-human. He argued:

"The real remedy for breaking caste is intermarriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of caste" (Ambedkar 1936, 41) [1].

Guru's alignment with this lineage is clear. He views morality not as a spiritual or cultural essence—as Tagore often does—but as an ethical practice grounded in justice, recognition, and structural transformation. His critique is both political and epistemic: it challenges not only the institutions of caste and nation, but also the ways of knowing and feeling that reproduce them.

In calling for a move "beyond" both derivative (Westernized) and desi (indigenised, caste-insulated) models of Indian identity, Guru demands a new moral language—one that emerges from the lived experiences of Dalits, women, Adivasis, and other marginalised groups. This moral vocabulary, unlike Tagore's spiritual internationalism, is resolutely materialist, shaped by histories of pain, exclusion, resistance, and hope.

Furthermore, Guru's contribution is significant in how it shifts the site of moral authority. In nationalist discourse, moral authority often resides in mythic figures—Mahatma Gandhi, the spiritualised figure of Bharat Mata, or ancient rishis and sages. Guru, in contrast, centres ordinary people, particularly those from oppressed communities, as moral agents capable of critiquing and reshaping the nation. In doing so, he reclaims morality from its association with religious purity or upper-caste virtue and repositions it as a tool of subaltern politics.

Importantly, Guru's critique does not end with critique. His idea of the "beyond" is also a creative project—an invitation to imagine a new India, rooted in equity, dignity, and pluralism. It is a call to remake the nation not through nostalgic return or mimicry, but through radical reimagination. As such, morality in Guru's framework is not about return; it is about rupture.

The Discourse of "Beyond"

The concept of the "beyond" is a powerful analytical category in Gopal Guru's critique of nationalism, marking a theoretical and ethical rupture from the twin failures of derivative and desi models of Indian identity. Guru uses "beyond" not as a vague aspiration or rhetorical flourish, but as a pointed philosophical gesture—a demand to transcend the historical structures and epistemologies that have excluded the voices of the oppressed from the mainstream idea of India.

The "derivative" refers to those postcolonial nationalist frameworks that simply transplanted the European model of the nation-state into the Indian context, often without adequate reflection on its social implications. In this model, colonial categories of governance, liberal modernity, and state rationality are superficially indigenised, but not radically questioned. Such a nation is administratively sovereign but intellectually dependent. Guru contends that this mimicry reproduces colonial hierarchies in new forms and fails to challenge the internal fault lines of caste, gender, and region.

In contrast, "desi" essentialism refers to the uncritical embrace of a so-called indigenous past, often grounded in Brahmanical Hindu traditions that naturalise the caste order as divine or cultural. This version of nationalism sanitizes history by conflating Hindu heritage with Indian identity, thus excluding vast sections of the population—particularly Dalits, Muslims, Adivasis, and women—from the idea of the nation. Guru critiques this model for elevating a narrow, Sanskritised version of Indian culture as universal, thereby reinforcing symbolic and structural violence in the name of cultural authenticity.

Guru's "beyond" is therefore a third space—a conceptual location from which to rethink the nation from the margins. It is a horizon of possibility that refuses both Western mimicry and Brahmanical nostalgia. Instead, it calls for a new moral-political framework grounded in the lived experiences of caste subjugation, labour exploitation, and epistemic erasure. This "beyond" is not utopian in the escapist sense, but imminently political—a demand for justice, dignity, and epistemic redistribution in the here and now.

Tagore, too, gestures toward a form of "beyond." His critique of nationalism rejects both Western imperialism and narrow parochialism. His vision of a future world—a world of moral interdependence, spiritual solidarity, and cross-cultural dialogue—is shaped by his deep engagement with Upanishadic philosophy, Brahmo reformism, and humanist universalism. In this sense, Tagore's "beyond" seeks to transcend the violent materialism of nationalism by invoking a shared moral-spiritual humanity. As Ashis Nandy (1983) [14] notes, Tagore offered a vision of modernity not as rational secularisation but as moral resistance to colonial domination—a recovery of the ethical self in the face of mechanised political life.

However, while Tagore's universalism is ethically compelling, Guru's critique helps reveal its limitations. For Dalit thinkers, the spiritual language invoked by Tagore is often inaccessible—not only because of historical exclusion from scriptural knowledge and spiritual institutions, but because these very institutions have been complicit in justifying caste hierarchies. Hindu spirituality, despite its philosophical profundity, has rarely been a space of liberation for the oppressed. Guru thus warns against moral discourses that pretend to be inclusive while remaining structurally hierarchical.

Where Tagore seeks to transcend conflict through moral synthesis, Guru calls for rupture and reconstruction. The former imagines a global spiritual commonwealth beyond the nation-state; the latter insists on transforming the nation itself through caste-based critique. In this sense, Guru's "beyond" is less metaphysical and more materialist, grounded in a politics of praxis, solidarity, and resistance.

Moreover, the "beyond" in Guru's framework is not simply theoretical. It manifests in subaltern movements, Dalit literature, grassroots struggles, and vernacular intellectual traditions that question dominant narratives of history, citizenship, and morality. It demands new moral languages—languages that emerge not from ancient scriptures or colonial theory, but from lived experience, community suffering, and collective imagination. These moral vocabularies are often fragmentary, dissensual, and disruptive—but therein lies their power. They refuse the comfort of harmony and insist on the dignity of difference.

In this light, the "beyond" becomes not just a philosophical gesture but a pedagogical project—a call to unlearn the categories that have defined the nation and relearn from those who have been excluded from its making. It asks not just how India is imagined, but who gets to imagine India, and on what moral terms.

Tagore vs. Guru: Divergent Moral Vocabularies

While both Rabindranath Tagore and Gopal Guru offer powerful critiques of nationalism, their moral vocabularies—that is, the ethical frameworks through which they articulate critique and envision transformation—are shaped by profoundly different positionalities, historical contexts, and political commitments.

Tagore writes from the vantage point of an elite, upper-caste, cosmopolitan intellectual. A member of the Bengali Brahmin community and heir to the reformist Brahmo Samaj tradition, he was deeply embedded in both Indian classical thought and global liberal humanism. His critique of nationalism is anchored in a vision of universal humanism, one that privileges spiritual harmony, moral love, and ethical cosmopolitanism over political antagonism or material demands. For Tagore, the nation—as a political and territorial unit—is far less significant than the moral-spiritual destiny of humankind. He believed India could offer the world an alternative to the violent, industrialised nationalism of the West—a vision of civilisation grounded in tolerance, introspection, and unity in diversity.

However, this vision of morality, while noble in tone, tends to downplay identity politics and historical specificity. Tagore's insistence on transcending caste, race, and nationality through spiritual elevation often lacks concrete strategies for dismantling institutionalised forms of oppression. His ideal of a harmonious civilisation, though inspiring, risks erasing the lived realities of inequality—especially caste, which, far from being a relic of the past, continues to structure everyday social relations. As Sudipta Kaviraj (2010) [10] observes, Tagore's nationalism bears a "revivalist romanticism"—a yearning for a precolonial cultural wholeness—that fails to engage with the foundational violence and exclusions of that very cultural order.

In contrast, Gopal Guru writes as a Dalit intellectual and political philosopher, shaped by the emancipatory traditions of Jyotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar. His moral vocabulary is grounded not in a spiritual metaphysics but in historical suffering, structural critique, and epistemic resistance. For Guru, the language of universalism—as offered by figures like Tagore—is often a discursive smokescreen, obscuring the persistence of caste-based domination under the guise of moral elevation. The call to transcend difference, in this reading, becomes a strategy of upper-caste evasion—a way of avoiding accountability for structural inequality by appealing to vague ideals of love and unity.

Guru insists on the necessity of epistemic rupture—a break from both colonial and Brahmanical ways of knowing, being, and imagining India. He argues that the authority to define morality cannot be left in the hands of those who have historically enjoyed social dominance. Instead, moral knowledge must emerge from those who have endured systemic dehumanisation—particularly Dalits, whose everyday experiences of exclusion constitute a vital archive of ethical resistance. His framework of morality is not conciliatory but confrontational: it demands the annihilation of caste, the transformation of society's foundational values, and the redistribution of moral and epistemic power.

Where Tagore imagines the nation as a site for ethical synthesis, Guru views it as a contested space that has yet to account for its own internal hierarchies. For him, India cannot become a moral community until it fully reckons with its caste-based exclusions, and this reckoning cannot happen through appeals to spiritual unity alone. Instead, it requires a radical redefinition of the nation's moral centre, one that is led by those previously excluded from its imagination.

This leads to a striking contrast in political subjectivities. Tagore envisions the citizen as a moral agent of peace, guided by love, sympathy, and humanistic ideals. Guru, however, centres a fractured, resistant subject—a political agent whose identity is formed through struggle, negation, and the refusal to be incorporated into the dominant moral order. Drawing on Ambedkar's rejection of Hindu moral universals and Phule's critique of Brahminical historiography, Guru posits a new ethical subjectivity: one that is partial, oppositional, and yet vitally generative.

Their opposing moral idioms—Tagore's reconciliatory humanism and Guru's resistant radicalism—underscore the diversity of ethical thought in India's intellectual history. While Tagore invites us to transcend the nation for a higher moral unity, Guru insists that the nation must first be deconstructed and rebuilt from the vantage of those whom it has historically oppressed.

Together, they offer not a synthesis but a productive dissonance. In that tension lies the possibility of reimagining nationalism not as a completed project but as an unfinished moral question—a question that demands constant engagement, discomfort, and revision from multiple, often conflicting, perspectives.

Morality and Resistance: Convergences

Despite their profound philosophical and social differences, Rabindranath Tagore and Gopal Guru converge in their refusal to accept nationalism as a sufficient or ultimate moral project. Both thinkers expose the limitations of the nation-state—whether as an imported colonial form or an indigenised construct—as a vehicle for genuine ethical community. In their distinct ways, each proposes that resistance to injustice, exclusion, and violence must extend beyond the narrow boundaries of nationalism, which often masquerades as moral but is structured through mechanisms of hierarchy, domination, and silencing.

Tagore's resistance is directed toward the instrumental rationality and depersonalised violence that characterise Western nationalism—a nationalism driven by military power, industrial competition, and the collective ego of the state. For him, this form of nationalism is not only morally hollow but also spiritually destructive. He feared that India's adoption of the Western model would lead to the suppression of the individual soul, the erosion of creativity, and the collapse of ethical responsibility. His alternative lies in spiritual cosmopolitanism, in a vision of a world where nations relate not through power and fear, but through mutual respect, empathy, and moral introspection.

Guru, on the other hand, confronts the structural and epistemic violence embedded within Indian nationalism itself—a violence that is not external or imported but internal and historic, rooted in the caste system and perpetuated by postcolonial state ideologies. He critiques

the nationalist imagination for privileging Brahmanical narratives, which construct unity by erasing or marginalising Dalit and subaltern experiences. Guru's resistance is not metaphysical but materialist, grounded in lived realities of humiliation, exclusion, and systemic inequality. For him, moral transformation must involve redistributing epistemic authority—who gets to speak, whose suffering counts, and who defines the nation's moral vocabulary.

Both thinkers are therefore united in their suspicion of "mechanical unity"—a unity imposed from above, lacking the richness of lived difference. Tagore critiques it as a soulless imitation of the West, where society is organised for utility rather than meaning. He warns against the loss of emotional and spiritual depth under systems that prioritise efficiency and uniformity. Guru sees the same mechanical impulse at work in Indian nationalism's caste-blind narrative of harmony, where "unity" becomes a way to conceal the persistence of social inequality. For Guru, such unity is not a moral good, but a mask for upper-caste consensus that silences dissent and homogenises difference.

This shared critique opens up the space for a moral politics beyond nationalism—a politics that does not seek to manage people through bureaucratic control, religious symbolism, or cultural nostalgia, but rather seeks to foster communities built on ethical dialogue, justice, and pluralism. For both thinkers, morality is not a private virtue or spiritual retreat, but a public force—an orientation that challenges the dominant logic of the state, the market, and majoritarian ideologies.

Tagore's appeal is to empathy and universality—a call to recover the moral soul of humanity in a world ravaged by violence and greed. Guru's appeal is to dignity and recognition—a demand for the structural reorganisation of society to account for those historically excluded. While one seeks transcendence, the other demands transformation. Yet both refuse to reduce the human to the national, and both seek to expand the space of politics to include that which nationalism has rendered unintelligible: spiritual complexity, caste-based suffering, affective solidarity, and the ethics of refusal.

In this convergence, we find a shared insistence that true resistance cannot be merely political in the formal sense—it must be moral in the radical sense. It must question what is taken for granted, it must disturb the peace of consensus, and it must open new imaginaries for justice. Through very different routes, both Tagore and Guru arrive at the same conclusion: the nation is not enough. The task is not to perfect it, but to outgrow it—ethically, imaginatively, and structurally.

Ambedkar, Phule, and the Rewriting of the Moral

Gopal Guru's intellectual project cannot be understood without acknowledging the foundational role of Jyotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar in shaping his moral-political framework. His invocation of these figures is not a rhetorical gesture but a deliberate epistemological commitment—a choice to ground ethical discourse in the histories and struggles of those who have been structurally excluded from India's moral imagination. Phule and Ambedkar offer not just critiques of caste oppression; they offer alternative frameworks of morality, which disrupt both the spiritualised nationalism of thinkers like Tagore and the Brahmanical consensus that underpins much of Indian modernity.

Ambedkar, in particular, presents morality as a revolutionary force—a tool not for reconciliation but for structural rupture. His understanding of morality is anti-caste, anti-Hindu, and anti-paternalistic. In his view, caste is not a cultural aberration or an unfortunate social stratification—it is a perverse moral system, a deeply entrenched religious-political order that has normalized inequality, humiliation, and dehumanisation over centuries. In his landmark 1936 speech Annihilation of Caste, originally prepared for the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal (an anti-caste reformist group), Ambedkar bluntly states:

"The real remedy for breaking caste is intermarriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of caste." (Ambedkar 1936, 41) [1]

This statement is more than a policy proposal—it is a moral provocation, a call to disrupt the sacred codes of purity, endogamy, and social hierarchy that form the spine of Hindu society. For Ambedkar, true morality demands action, not contemplation; it requires the destruction of oppressive systems, not spiritual detachment from them. His moral philosophy is grounded in rationality, justice, and fraternity, and is inseparable from the political project of emancipation.

Phule's contributions, equally revolutionary, emphasized the subversion of Brahminical historiography and myth-making. He unveiled how religion, mythology, and education had been historically manipulated to establish and reinforce upper-caste hegemony. Through his critiques of the Manusmriti, the Puranas, and Vedic authority, Phule constructed a moral counter-narrative—one that reclaimed dignity for Shudras and Atishudras and articulated an ethics rooted in labour, social equality, and anti-patriarchy. His work in vernacular education, widow remarriage, and the upliftment of women reveals morality as a practical commitment to social equity, not as an abstract code.

Guru's reliance on these thinkers enables him to recode morality as praxis—a lived, embodied response to domination. Morality, for him, is not about metaphysical elevation or spiritual purity; it is about undoing the normalised structures of violence that masquerade as tradition, culture, or civilisational pride. His framework insists that morality must be forged in the crucible of resistance, and that ethical discourse must emerge from the everyday struggles of Dalits, not from elite debates or scriptural abstraction.

In this sense, morality becomes a site of political production. It is where power is contested, where epistemologies collide, and where new subjectivities are formed. Guru's approach aligns morality with accountability, embodied knowledge, and social transformation. It is explicitly anti-elitist, challenging the long-standing monopoly of upper-caste intellectuals over defining ethical norms.

Tagore, by contrast, while deeply humanistic in his outlook, remains at a distance from such praxis. His moral vision is shaped by spiritual universalism, poetic idealism, and a culturalist framework of civilisation. He calls for love, unity, and spiritual self-realisation, but he rarely confronts the material roots of social injustice with the clarity and urgency that Ambedkar or Phule demand. While Tagore acknowledges caste as a corrosive element in Indian society,

he does not theorise caste as a moral economy of domination, nor does he advocate for its annihilation.

As Partha Chatterjee (1993) [5] has observed, Tagore's project was to craft a "spiritual counter-modernity"—a vision of Indian identity that resisted both colonial materialism and indigenous obscurantism. However, this counter-modernity is ultimately elite in character. It draws on the resources of scriptural wisdom, artistic refinement, and introspective morality, but lacks a structural critique of oppression. Its central ethical figure is the seer-poet, not the marginalised labourer or the outcaste intellectual. As such, Tagore's morality, while profoundly introspective and aesthetically rich, falls short of becoming socially transformative.

Guru's alignment with Phule and Ambedkar thus marks a decisive epistemic and moral rupture from the mainstream liberal-nationalist tradition. He refuses the moral authority of the caste Hindu elite and repositions Dalit experience as a legitimate source of ethical knowledge. In doing so, he elevates a counter-tradition that understands morality not as the end-point of nationalist development but as its radical critique. His work insists that the future of Indian democracy depends not on perfecting nationalist ideals, but on dismantling the caste-based moral order that continues to shape the nation's soul.

Conclusion: Toward a Moral Politics of the Beyond

The juxtaposition of Rabindranath Tagore and Gopal Guru offers a fertile terrain for rethinking the ethical foundations of Indian nationalism. Their critiques—though issued from different centuries, castes, and political imaginaries—expose a common discontent with the dominant ways in which the Indian nation has been conceptualised, mobilised, and celebrated. Both thinkers reject the idea that the nation is an inherently sacred or benign entity. Instead, they demand that nationalism be held accountable to deeper moral and social principles.

Tagore, writing during colonial modernity, was among the earliest Indian thinkers to articulate a critique of nationalism not from a pro-colonial or reformist stance, but from a civilisational and spiritual standpoint. His discomfort with the idea of the modern nation was not due to political conservatism, but due to his belief that nationalism, in its mechanical, imitative, and egoistic form, corrodes the moral life of society. In his world-view, the nation, as it had manifested in the West and was being adopted in the East, prioritised uniformity over diversity, power over empathy, and competition over cooperation. His plea was for a nation—or perhaps a civilisation—that would root itself in the values of spiritual unity, compassion, and love.

Yet, as Gopal Guru reminds us, Tagore's vision—while noble—is marked by certain silences, particularly around caste. For Guru and the Ambedkarite tradition he draws from, nationalism's greatest failure is not only its mechanical rigidity or colonial mimicry, but its deep complicity with the caste order. Guru challenges the spiritual universalism of thinkers like Tagore by insisting that morality cannot bypass social justice. The very foundations of Indian nationalism, he argues, are flawed because they have been built on the exclusion of Dalit voices, experiences, and knowledges. In response, he offers a concept of morality as a politics of rupture—one that seeks to dismantle the very systems that have historically denied dignity to the oppressed.

The concept of the "beyond," central to Guru's essay, thus acquires philosophical and political urgency. It is not merely an abstract desire to transcend colonial and indigenous limitations; it is a moral imperative to break with both derivative (colonially borrowed) and desi (caste-hierarchical) forms of Indian identity. His call for the "beyond" resonates not just as critique, but as a blueprint for alternative futures—futures in which Dalit morality, epistemology, and politics are central to the Indian imagination.

Tagore, too, calls for a kind of "beyond"—a world after nationalism, after war, after competition. His emphasis on ethical cosmopolitanism, inter-cultural dialogue, and spiritual humility anticipates many of the critiques of nation-state logic that would emerge later in postcolonial and global political thought. However, while Tagore's moral philosophy is vertical (seeking transcendence), Guru's is horizontal (grounded in the struggle for justice here and now).

When read together, these two thinkers do not harmonise—and that is precisely their strength. Their moral vocabularies clash, overlap, and challenge one another. In Tagore, we find the gentleness of prophetic warning; in Guru, the urgency of moral confrontation. One appeals to the heart; the other to the conscience. But both remind us that nationalism, if it is to have any ethical legitimacy, must be constantly re-examined—not only in terms of its political achievements, but also in terms of its moral exclusions.

Today, as India faces renewed debates over identity, belonging, and the meaning of nationhood, returning to Tagore and Guru is not a mere academic exercise. It is a way of recovering the moral imagination—that space where critique becomes care, and where resistance becomes the foundation for more humane, plural, and just futures. It is only by confronting both the spiritual failures and the social hierarchies embedded in nationalism that we can begin to think, as these thinkers compel us to do, beyond the nation.

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