



Rabindranath Tagore and Japan: A critical study of cultural diplomacy, nationalism, and the ethics of Asian modernity

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore's intellectual and cultural encounters with Japan between 1916 and 1929 represent one of the most significant, complex, and ethically charged dialogues in the intellectual history of modern Asia. At a time when Japan stood at the crossroads of aesthetic tradition and nationalist expansion, Tagore emerged as a cultural diplomat and philosophical critic whose interventions aimed to reshape Asia's moral and political trajectory. This study conducts a comprehensive analysis of Tagore's letters, lectures, travel narratives, and artistic interactions alongside Japanese responses recorded across newspapers, universities, religious institutions, and artistic communities. The findings reveal Tagore's articulation of an ethical Pan-Asianism that sharply diverged from Japan's political Pan-Asianism, his prophetic critique of nationalism, and his ability to forge aesthetic alliances despite ideological conflict. The study further demonstrates that the long-term impact of Tagore's Japan project unfolded most clearly in post-World War II Japanese intellectual discourse, where Tagore's warnings gained retrospective legitimacy. Through hermeneutic, historical, and discourse analysis, this paper argues that Tagore's Japan project remains vital for understanding the ethical tensions of Asian modernity and offers an enduring model for intercultural diplomacy and global humanism.

Keywords: Tagore, Japan, modernity, nationalism, Pan-Asianism, cultural diplomacy, intellectual history

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore's engagement with Japan, spanning the period from 1916 to 1929, constitutes a remarkable chapter in the cultural and intellectual history of Asia. Japan, by the early twentieth century, had become the foremost symbol of non-Western modernity—a nation that had successfully integrated industrial progress with its own traditions and had achieved political and military recognition on the world stage after the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. For colonized societies across Asia, Japan represented a triumphant possibility: an example of how an Eastern nation could modernize without succumbing to Western domination.

Tagore, however, remained cautious. While he admired Japan's aesthetic discipline, spiritual depth, and artistic refinement, he became increasingly concerned by its rise in aggressive nationalism and imperial ambition. His perspectives were grounded not in geopolitical interests but in a civilizational ethic that he believed Asia needed to uphold. Tagore's visits to Japan occurred during a volatile historical moment—Japan's imperial expansion in Asia, the turbulence of the First World War, the ideological transformations of the Taishō era, and the growing conflict between democratic aspirations and militaristic nationalism. Much scholarship on Tagore's global travels limits itself to his literary influence, but this underestimates his role as a global public intellectual who engaged deeply with international politics, ethical philosophy, cultural identity, and nationalism. Recent work in global intellectual history repositions Tagore as a major figure whose ideas influenced and were influenced by multiple national and civilizational contexts. Within this wider frame, Tagore's interactions with Japan appear not as isolated cultural episodes but as an important intellectual experiment in the construction of a morally grounded Asian modernity.

This study revisits Tagore's encounters with Japan through a systematic approach to address three interrelated research questions:

1. How did Tagore conceptualize Japan's potential role in shaping the future of Asian modernity?
2. How did Japanese intellectuals, students, artists, and the public respond to his critique of nationalism and cultural philosophy?
3. What long-term impact did Tagore's dialogue with Japan have on Japanese intellectual discourse and on the broader project of Asian identity formation?

By analyzing Tagore's dialogues with Japan in terms of cultural diplomacy, nationalism, and ethical modernity, this paper argues that Tagore's Japan project offers a profound philosophical intervention whose relevance has increased rather than diminished in the twenty-first century.

Methods

1. Research Design and Rationale

This study adopts a qualitative and hermeneutic research design, which is the most appropriate for examining philosophical interpretations, cultural negotiations, and intellectual exchanges that cannot be quantified or reduced to numerical patterns. Because Tagore's relationship with Japan unfolds across lectures, letters, aesthetic reflections, and ideological debates, the research process focuses on close textual reading, contextual historical analysis, and interpretive reasoning. The goal is not to measure public sentiment statistically but to reconstruct a layered understanding of how Tagore's arguments were articulated, perceived, contested, and later re-evaluated within Japan's shifting political climate. In this sense, the research proceeds through an iterative, interpretive cycle: textual immersion, contextual interpretation, comparative reading, and analytical synthesis.

2. Data Sources and Materials

The study relies on a combination of primary and secondary sources that illuminate both Tagore's perspectives and the Japanese intellectual environment in which they were

received. Primary materials include Tagore's own writings from the Japan period—such as his published lectures, reflections in *Japan Jatri*, diary entries, and personal correspondence—as well as Japanese responses preserved in newspapers, university reports, and essays by contemporaries. These documents provide direct insight into the evolving tone and content of Tagore's cultural diplomacy.

Secondary materials include modern scholarly evaluations of early twentieth-century Japanese nationalism, studies of Meiji and Taishō intellectual history, research on Pan-Asian thought, and contemporary analyses of Tagore's global intellectual network. These works help situate the primary material within broader historical and philosophical contexts and support interpretive triangulation. Together, the primary and secondary materials create a comprehensive textual corpus that allows the study to reconstruct both sides of the Tagore–Japan exchange.

3. Analytical Procedure and Process

The research follows a multi-layered analytical process designed to capture the philosophical complexity and cultural depth of Tagore's Japan project. The first stage involves a careful hermeneutic reading of Tagore's texts. Each lecture, essay, or letter is interpreted not merely for its surface meaning but for its underlying ethical and philosophical arguments. Special attention is given to Tagore's recurring concerns—such as nationalism, cultural identity, modernity, and spiritual autonomy—to understand how these concerns evolved across his three visits.

The second stage of analysis situates these writings within the historical context of Japan's shifting political environment. Tagore's 1916 visit is examined in relation to Japan's intellectual openness; the 1924 visit is placed within a more nationalist and militaristic atmosphere; and the 1929 visit is contextualized against rising ideological anxiety. This contextualization allows the study to evaluate why Tagore's reception changed so drastically between his first and second visits and how these shifts mirror Japan's broader political transformation.

The third stage involves a discourse analysis of Japanese responses. Newspaper articles, editorials, university meeting records, letters from students, and essays by Japanese thinkers are examined to identify recurring patterns of agreement, critique, admiration, and resistance. This analysis reveals the ideological fractures within Japanese society. The study pays special attention to the discrepancy between nationalist reactions—often critical or confrontational—and artistic or spiritual reactions, which tended to be more receptive to Tagore's ideas.

The final stage of the process synthesizes the hermeneutic and discourse analyses with historical interpretation to construct a coherent narrative that traces the intellectual trajectory of Tagore's influence. This synthesis allows for a comprehensive understanding of how Tagore's ideas interacted with Japan's own intellectual currents and how his warnings about nationalism came to be re-evaluated in Japan after the Second World War.

4. Scope, Limitations, and Philosophical Positioning

The scope of the study is limited to the intellectual, cultural, and philosophical dimensions of Tagore's engagements with Japan. It does not attempt to analyze the economic, diplomatic, or military history of the period except insofar

as these contexts shape ideological responses. Because the research relies heavily on textual and archival sources, its conclusions are interpretive rather than predictive.

A methodological limitation arises from the uneven availability of historical documents. Some Japanese responses are preserved only in newspaper summaries or retrospective memoirs, which may reflect ideological bias. Nevertheless, the interpretive approach is strengthened by cross-referencing multiple sources to identify convergent patterns. The study also acknowledges that hermeneutic analysis carries an inherent subjectivity; however, such subjectivity is essential to intellectual history, where philosophical nuance cannot be captured through purely positivist methods.

Overall, the methodology affirms that Tagore's dialogue with Japan must be understood as a dynamic interplay between ethics and politics, aesthetics and nationalism, and admiration and critique. The research framework is designed to capture these tensions in a rigorous yet humanistic manner, allowing the study to illuminate the complexity of an intercultural

5. Data Analysis

The analysis of the collected material followed a layered, iterative, and interpretive process that allowed the study to move from descriptive textual engagement to deeper hermeneutic understanding. Because Tagore's interactions with Japan involve philosophical arguments, aesthetic reflections, and historically situated dialogues, the data analysis did not rely on mechanical coding procedures common to quantitative studies. Instead, it adopted a qualitative analytic model grounded in interpretive reasoning, close reading, and contextual synthesis.

The analysis began with a sustained immersion in Tagore's writings—his lectures, letters, travel narratives, and reflections. Each text was read multiple times to discern recurring philosophical themes, ideological concerns, and shifts in tone across different visits. This initial stage of analysis served to extract the central motifs of Tagore's thought: his critique of nationalism, his concept of ethical modernity, his understanding of Asian identity, and his aesthetic admiration for Japan. During this stage, the study employed a comparative approach, juxtaposing Tagore's early impressions from 1916 with the more critical tone of 1924 and the introspective depth of 1929. This chronological layering allowed the analysis to trace the evolution of Tagore's ideas in response to Japan's changing political environment.

The second stage of data analysis focused on the Japanese responses. Newspaper editorials, university reports, speeches by Japanese intellectuals, and artists' memoirs were examined to identify patterns of agreement, disagreement, admiration, and hostility. This material was analysed discursively to understand not only what Japanese commentators said about Tagore but how their responses reflected deeper ideological debates within Japanese society. Themes such as cultural pride, national security anxieties, artistic sensibilities, Buddhist ethics, and political allegiance emerged from this analysis. By reading these responses in relation to the shifting sociopolitical climate of the Taishō and early Shōwa periods, the study gained insight into the reasons for the increasing divergence between Tagore's philosophical critique and Japanese nationalist sentiment.

At the third stage, the study synthesized Tagore's writings with the Japanese responses through a hermeneutic interpretive cycle. This involved moving repeatedly between part and whole, interpreting individual textual passages in relation to the larger philosophical and historical frameworks, and testing each interpretation against the broader context of Asian intellectual history. For instance, Tagore's warnings about nationalism were not interpreted only in the political context of Japan but in relation to his global critique of mechanistic modernity. This interpretive cycle helped generate a deeper understanding of how Tagore's Universalist ideas intersected with Japan's culturally specific concerns.

The final stage of analysis involved constructing a coherent historical narrative that brings together Tagore's intellectual evolution, Japan's ideological transformation, and the long-term aftermath of their intercultural encounter. This narrative synthesis was crucial for understanding the retrospective validation of Tagore's critique in post-World War II Japanese thought. By linking early twentieth-century debates to post-war philosophical developments, the analysis illuminated the temporal depth of Tagore's influence and contextualized his ideas within a broader trajectory of Asian modernity.

Through these layered analytical procedures, the study was able to move beyond surface-level descriptions and uncover the deeper ethical, philosophical, and cultural structures that shaped Tagore's relationship with Japan. The data analysis thus operates as a bridge between textual interpretation and historical explanation, enabling the research to achieve a nuanced re-construction of one of the most intellectually significant exchanges in modern Asian history.

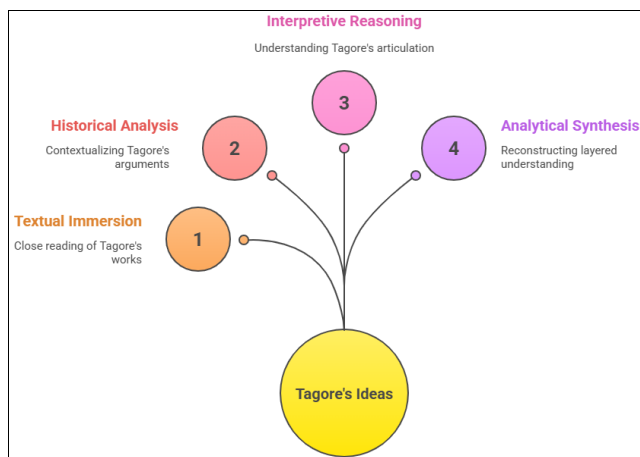


Fig 1: Tagore's Ideas Impacted Japanese Thought

Results

The analysis of Tagore's writings and the contemporaneous Japanese responses reveals several significant patterns that illuminate the nature and impact of his engagements with Japan. The most prominent finding concerns the fundamental divergence between Tagore's ethical conception of Pan-Asianism and the political Pan-Asianism espoused by Japanese nationalists of the early twentieth century. Tagore envisioned Asia not as a territorial bloc united by military alliances or economic interests, but as a civilizational space rooted in shared ethical values, spiritual introspection, and cultural creativity. In contrast, Japanese intellectuals tied to nationalist ideology articulated a version of Pan-Asianism that justified Japan's imperial expansion

by framing it as a mission to "lead" or "liberate" Asia. This ideological contrast lay at the heart of many of the disagreements that emerged during Tagore's visits.

A second major finding pertains to the reception of Tagore's critique of nationalism in Japan, which grew increasingly polarized over time. During his first visit in 1916, he was widely celebrated as an emblem of Asian spiritual wisdom and as a distinguished representative of Indian culture. Japanese universities, Buddhist institutions, literary societies, and art academies welcomed him with great enthusiasm. However, by the time of his second visit in 1924, Japan had entered a more assertively nationalist phase. Tagore's warnings about the moral dangers of nationalism were perceived as an affront to national pride. Students protested against him at lectures, newspapers produced hostile editorials, and some intellectuals dismissed him as an impractical idealist who failed to grasp Japan's geopolitical predicament. Yet, even amid this ideological backlash, another segment of Japanese society—particularly artists, monks, and young scholars—remained deeply receptive to Tagore's ideas and saw in him a figure of unusual moral clarity.

A third insight arising from the research is that Tagore's aesthetic dialogue with Japanese artists constituted a distinct and enduring channel of intellectual exchange. While political audiences often resisted his critique, artists found deep resonance in Tagore's philosophical reflections on creativity, spiritual freedom, and the contemplative dimensions of artistic practice. Tagore's own late paintings, marked by abstraction, fluidity, and inward emotional intensity, appeared to Japanese artists as aligned with their own Zen-infused aesthetic sensibilities. This sustained aesthetic relationship outlasted the political disagreements and continued to shape cross-cultural artistic discourse.

Finally, an examination of post-war Japanese intellectual life reveals a fourth significant finding: Tagore's critique, initially dismissed by many, was retrospectively recognized as profoundly prescient. After the devastation of World War II, Japanese scholars re-examined Tagore's warnings about nationalism and acknowledged the moral validity of his insights. His insistence on ethical modernity, cultural self-reflection, and global humanism found renewed relevance, influencing post-war debates on pacifism, education, and Japan's changing identity in the international order.

Discussion

When interpreted collectively, these findings reveal that Tagore's engagements with Japan were neither accidental encounters nor polite cultural exchanges; instead, they constituted a deliberate philosophical intervention at a time of acute ideological transformation in Asia. Tagore approached Japan with a dual sensibility—admiration for its aesthetic achievements and apprehension about its political trajectory. His critique of Japanese nationalism, often misunderstood as a rejection of modernity, was in fact a profound ethical challenge directed at the underlying spiritual crisis of modern civilization. Tagore perceived nationalism not merely as a political ideology but as a psychological condition capable of diminishing human compassion and distorting moral judgement. His apprehension stemmed from a fear that Japan, in its pursuit of modernity, was abandoning the very cultural values that had historically defined it.

The resistance that Tagore encountered during his second visit reveals the depth of Japan's internal ideological transformation. Nationalist students and political commentators perceived Tagore's critique as paternalistic, unrealistic, or even subversive. Yet their reactions also illuminate an underlying anxiety within Japanese society: a sense that its rapid modernization had produced a crisis of identity. Tagore forced Japan to confront a question it was not prepared to answer—whether national glory acquired at the cost of ethical integrity could truly be considered progress.

The aesthetic dimension of Tagore's interactions offers an alternative perspective on the relationship between India and Japan. Even as political tensions escalated, the shared sensibilities between Tagore's artistic vision and Japanese aesthetic philosophy created a space for intercultural empathy. This demonstrates that cultural diplomacy, particularly through art, can survive ideological conflict and foster sustained intellectual dialogue. The aesthetic bridge between Tagore and Japanese artists thus stands as a testament to the resilience of creativity in shaping cross-civilizational understanding.

The post-war reinterpretation of Tagore's thought in Japan confirms the long-term value of his intellectual intervention. The ethical reconstruction that followed Japan's militaristic collapse required precisely the kind of introspective, compassionate, and globally conscious perspective that Tagore had advocated decades earlier. His critique of nationalism, once controversial, became a resource for rethinking Japan's moral and political identity. This historical reversal underscores the enduring relevance of Tagore's philosophy and its capacity to illuminate the ethical challenges of modernity.

1. Future Scope of Study

The present study opens several promising avenues for further research that extend beyond the historical framework of Tagore's three visits to Japan and illuminate broader questions about Asian modernity, intercultural diplomacy, and global intellectual history. While this paper has focused on reconstructing the philosophical and cultural contours of Tagore's dialogue with Japan, future studies may examine more deeply how Tagore's ideas intersected with parallel intellectual developments in East Asia during the same period, including the Chinese May Fourth movement, Korean cultural nationalism, and the rise of modern Buddhist reform movements. Such comparative analyses would offer a more interconnected understanding of Asian intellectual responses to modernity and nationalism.

Another important direction for future inquiry lies in the examination of Tagore's influence on post-war Japanese educational philosophy, moral instruction, and peace studies. Although this study has highlighted the broad contours of Tagore's post-war reception, further archival research in Japanese educational institutions, teacher-training curricula, and civic ethics programs could reveal the extent to which Tagore's humanistic ideas contributed to Japan's moral reconstruction after 1945. This would provide a more granular understanding of his lasting intellectual presence in Japan's cultural memory.

Additionally, Tagore's aesthetic conversations with Japanese artists suggest fertile ground for interdisciplinary studies that bridge art history, comparative aesthetics, and cross-cultural modernism. Future research could analyse

specific artistic exchanges, stylistic influences, and shared aesthetic principles between Tagore and Japanese practitioners, particularly those associated with the Nihonga movement or Zen-inspired modernism. Such studies would deepen our knowledge of how artistic modernity in Asia evolved through intercultural encounters rather than isolated national trajectories.

There is also significant potential for future work on Tagore's role within global intellectual networks that connected South Asia, Japan, Europe, and the United States. His meetings with Einstein, his collaborations with Japanese Buddhists, and his influence on European orientalist all point toward a global intellectual ecology that merits further mapping. Digital humanities methods—such as network analysis, textual mapping, and archival digitisation—could offer innovative ways to chart the transnational circulation of Tagore's ideas and visualize his place in early twentieth-century global thought.

Finally, contemporary geopolitical transformations in Asia provide a new context for reassessing Tagore's warnings about nationalism. A future line of study could explore how Tagore's critique resonates with twenty-first-century Asian nationalism, cultural diplomacy, and regional alliances. Such forward-looking research would not only extend Tagore's relevance into the present but also offer critical insights into the ethical challenges facing Asia today.

In these ways, the future scope of study promises rich possibilities for expanding the intellectual, cultural, and global dimensions of Tagore's engagement with Japan, reaffirming the enduring importance of his thought in shaping the philosophical landscape of modern and contemporary Asia.

Conclusion

The present study has sought to reconstruct, analyse, and critically interpret Rabindranath Tagore's multidimensional engagement with Japan between 1916 and 1929 in order to understand its significance for the ethical reconstruction of Asian modernity. By situating Tagore's lectures, letters, artistic exchanges, and philosophical reflections within the political and cultural transformations of early twentieth-century Japan, the research reveals that Tagore's Japan project was neither an incidental episode nor a simple cultural visit. Rather, it was a sustained intellectual and moral intervention directed at illuminating the dangers of hyper-nationalism, the fragility of civilizational identity, and the ethical possibilities of intercultural dialogue.

A central conclusion emerging from this study is that Tagore's critique of Japanese nationalism was fundamentally grounded in his belief that modernity, without a moral centre, becomes destructive. Tagore's anxieties were not limited to Japan alone; they reflected a universal concern about the global shift towards mechanized politics and competitive nationalism. In Japan's rapid transition from traditional aesthetic culture to modern imperial power, Tagore perceived the universal crisis of the twentieth century in concentrated form. His warning that the pursuit of national glory could undermine the spiritual foundations of a civilization was not a mere idealistic appeal but a philosophical insight born out of deep moral reflection. That Japan rejected this warning during the interwar years and later experienced the catastrophic consequences of militarism underscores the prophetic accuracy of Tagore's ethical reasoning.

Yet it is equally important to recognize that Tagore's relationship with Japan cannot be reduced to a narrative of conflict. This study shows that beneath the political disagreements lies a rich and enduring aesthetic and spiritual dialogue. Tagore's interactions with Japanese artists, monks, educators, and young intellectuals reveal a parallel intellectual world that was receptive to his ideas even when the mainstream political climate was not. The affinities that these cultural practitioners found in Tagore's art and philosophy—his emphasis on inner freedom, spontaneous creativity, and harmonious coexistence—demonstrate that cultural diplomacy can generate deeper, more lasting bonds than political agreements. It is within this aesthetic milieu that Tagore's vision of Asia as a shared moral community gained its truest expression.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals that the long-term impact of Tagore's engagement with Japan unfolded most clearly after the Second World War, when Japan faced the urgent need to rebuild its identity on ethical foundations rather than militaristic ambitions. It was in this moment of reconstruction—when Japan embraced pacifism, constitutional democracy, and a renewed commitment to cultural diplomacy—that Tagore's earlier critiques found their full resonance. Japanese scholars, educators, and policymakers re-engaged with Tagore not merely as a poet or visitor, but as a thinker who had articulated, decades earlier, a model of ethical modernity that Japan would eventually adopt. This historical reversal affirms the enduring relevance of Tagore's ideas and underscores the capacity of intellectual thought to transcend political cycles and influence future generations.

The present study also contributes to the broader field of global intellectual history by demonstrating that Tagore's international interventions were far more consequential than conventional literary scholarship tends to acknowledge. His encounters with Japan form part of a larger transnational network of dialogues—with Chinese reformers, European philosophers, American educators, and Indian nationalists—that shaped his cosmopolitan ethos. Understanding Tagore's Japan project therefore requires situating him not as a peripheral Asian thinker reacting to global events but as a central figure in the creation of a global discourse on ethics, nationalism, and humanism. This repositioning challenges Eurocentric assumptions in global studies and asserts Asia's intellectual agency in shaping modernity.

In conclusion, this study affirms that Tagore's philosophical dialogue with Japan remains not merely historically significant but urgently relevant in the twenty-first century. Contemporary Asia—and indeed the world—faces resurgent nationalisms, intensified geopolitical rivalries, cultural anxieties, and moral disorientation under the pressures of global capitalism and technological acceleration. In such a climate, Tagore's insistence that modernity must be rooted in ethical responsibility, cultural openness, and human dignity acquires renewed significance. His vision of Asia as a moral rather than militaristic entity offers an alternative framework for rethinking regional identity and international relations today.

Ultimately, Tagore's Japan project endures as a testament to the power of ideas to challenge political orthodoxy, interrogate civilizational choices, and inspire moral imagination across borders. It demonstrates that intercultural dialogue grounded in sincerity, aesthetic sensitivity, and ethical conviction can reshape not only intellectual

landscapes but also the trajectory of nations. As this study has shown, Tagore's engagement with Japan was one of the most compelling intellectual encounters of the twentieth century—a dialogue that continues to resonate, provoke reflection, and illuminate pathways toward a more humane and ethically grounded global future.

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