

Voices Against Caste Discrimination: Rabindranath Tagore and the Legacy of the Sikh Bhagats



Dr. Bikash Das

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Raja Birendra Chandra College Kandi, Murshidabad, West Bengal, India

Despite unprecedented scientific and technological progress in the twenty-first century, Indian society continues to grapple with caste-based discrimination. Incidents of social exclusion, caste atrocities, and at times brutal oppression of marginalized communities persist the grim reality of long-rooted hierarchies despite constitutional safeguards and legal protections. Such discrimination, evident even during India's struggle for independence, constituted serious barriers to unity. More than seventy-five years after independence, the nation still struggles to overcome this structural injustice.

This article revisits Rabindranath Tagore's foresight, particularly his insistence that political freedom without social emancipation remained incomplete. For Tagore, the nationalist struggle was not merely a contest against colonial domination but also a battle against internal divisions that fractured India's collective consciousness. He envisioned liberation as inseparable from ethical and social regeneration, grounded in the primacy of humanity over sectarian boundaries. To articulate this vision, Tagore drew upon the egalitarian teachings of the medieval Sikh Bhagats enshrined in the Guru Granth Sahib who strongly criticized caste and ritual practices. They emphasised on equality and the dignity of all people. Their ideas matched Tagore's vision of a 'spiritual democracy,' which went beyond both colonial rule and social hierarchies.

By bringing Tagore's ideas together with these traditions, this paper argues that caste—both in the past and today—remains a major obstacle to social harmony and national unity. It further underscores the enduring relevance of Tagore's thought in addressing present-day challenges of untouchability and identity-based exclusion.

Key Words: Rabindranath Tagore, Caste Discrimination, Teachings of Sikh Bhagats, Human Dignity

Biography:

Dr. Bikash Das serves as an Assistant Professor of History at Raja Birendra Chandra College, Kandi, Murshidabad, West Bengal, India. He completed his Ph.D. at Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, with a thesis entitled "Rabindranath Tagore: The Indian Freedom Struggle and the Sikh Tradition of Martyrdom." His research explores the intersections of literature, historical developments, and spiritual traditions in shaping nationalist thought. He has presented papers at national and international conferences and published in esteemed journals, contributing to a deeper understanding of India's historical and cultural heritage.