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Tagore at 165: What the Charkha Debate Tells Us About Nationalism Today

INDIAN EXPRESS

9 May 2026

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Tagore argued that national symbols become dangerous when they suppress rational enquiry. In contemporary India, where does the line fall between cultural pride and the 'cult' Tagore warned against?"

EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

On Rabindranath Tagore's 165th birth anniversary, Indian Express revisits the Tagore-Gandhi debate over the charkha as a lens for understanding the contemporary tension between nationalism and humanism — arguing that Tagore's warnings about symbolic nationalism substituting for rational enquiry are strikingly relevant in 2026.

BEYOND THE SPINNING WHEEL

In his 1925 essay *"The Cult of the Charkha,"* Tagore wrote what appears, on its surface, to be an argument about a tool. But the real subject was **what kind of India the freedom movement was building** — and what kind of Indian citizen it was producing.

Gandhi's charkha demanded uniformity: every Congress member must spin, every household must produce khadi, every political act must be infused with the simplicity of the wheel. Tagore saw in this a dangerous conflation of political necessity with intellectual principle. A strategy of mobilisation had been mistaken for a vision of civilisation.

THE TWO VISIONS

Gandhi's India: The Moral Economy

Gandhi's vision was a **decentralised village economy** built on self-reliance and non-violence. The charkha was a *dharma* — a duty connecting each Indian to every other. For Gandhi, its value was **moral and communitarian**: a daily practice of solidarity with the poorest, a rejection of colonial industrial modernity.

Tagore's India: The Creative Republic

Tagore sought an India that would **engage modernity critically** — retaining valuable traditions while embracing science and global exchange. His Shantiniketan model educated children through music, poetry, dance, and nature — because creativity and joy were the foundations of genuine development.

For Tagore, the charkha demanded the wrong sacrifice: giving up intellectual ambition in exchange for national solidarity. A nation of spinners would be a nation of suppressed minds.

WHY THIS DEBATE MATTERS IN 2026

The Pattern of Symbolic Nationalism

Every era produces its charkha debates — moments when a politically powerful symbol is elevated above rational critique. When pointing out a symbol's limitations becomes unpatriotic, Tagore's warning about "cult" is being fulfilled.

Education and Creativity

Tagore's argument for creative education over rote skill production has modern vindication in NITI Aayog's report (this week) noting India's schools prioritise textbook completion over foundational understanding. The charkha critique echoes: mechanical production of exam-passers is not education.

Nationalism and Global Engagement

Tagore was not anti-national — he renounced his knighthood at Jallianwala Bagh, wrote India's national anthem, and spent decades weaving Indian and international traditions together. His point: nationalism must not become a closed circle that refuses learning from the world.

UPSC MAINS ANALYSIS

GS Paper 1 — Modern Indian History, Art and Culture

GS Paper 4 – Ethics The conflict between loyalty to a cause (nationalism) and fidelity to one’s rational judgments (intellectual integrity) – Tagore chose intellectual honesty even at political cost.

Keywords: Cultural nationalism, charkha cult, Shantiniketan, creative education, Visva-Bharati, nationalism vs. humanism, swadeshi, Nai Talim

Mains Angles:

- ❶ “Tagore’s critique of Gandhian nationalism was not anti-national but supra-national.” Discuss.
- ❷ Compare the educational philosophies of Gandhi (Nai Talim) and Tagore (Shantiniketan).
- ❸ How did Tagore reconcile Indian identity with internationalism?

Indian Express argues: Tagore’s charkha critique is a perennial intellectual gift – a reminder that national symbols must remain accountable to rational scrutiny. When a symbol becomes beyond question, it has become a cult. Tagore’s voice – the critical patriot – is needed in every era tempted to confuse enthusiasm for wisdom.

Tagore was against the cult of the charkha, not against the freedom struggle – routinely misunderstood and a favourite UPSC source of confusion.

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