In 1916, Rabindranath Tagore, the first Nobel laureate of Asia, published one of his most inspiring novels, Ghare Baire (The home and the world), a very important writing for the understanding of the history of Bengal, its contemporary problems, and the way in which the West is presented in contrast with the East. But the novel also contains some essential details about the traditional Bengali household and the importance of having a strong cultural identity. It explains how belonging was understood in the Bengali society of those years. The story is told from the vantage point of each of the three main characters: Nikhilesh, Bimala, his wife, and Sandip, their friend. Ghare Baire explains the old against the new, the West against the East, the rational and the emotional, the conservative and the revolutionary, the home and the world, as understood by Rabindranath Tagore. In 1919, Ghare Baire was translated into English by the author’s nephew, Surendranath Tagore, with an input from Rabindranath himself. Nowadays it is available all over...
the world, in numerous translations, and is still seen as one of the most impor-
tant pieces that Tagore wrote in his long life.

In 2021, Amartya Sen, another Bengali Nobel laureate, whose name was
suggested by Rabindranath Tagore himself, published his memoirs, called Home
in the World, a long-awaited writing about home, belonging, inequality, and
identity. The central ‘character’ of this wonderful autobiographical volume is
the sense of belonging, of being part of a community. Professor Amartya Sen
began his teaching career at Jadavpur University in Calcutta (Kolkata). Then
life and scholarships took him, among others, to the Massachusetts Institute of
Technology, the University of Delhi and the Delhi School of Economics, the
London School of Economics and Political Science, and Harvard University.
This is, in fact, the reason why he calls many places home, including Dhaka, in
modern Bangladesh; Calcutta (Kolkata), where he first studied economics; and
Trinity College, Cambridge, where he engaged with the greatest minds of his
generation. In Home in the World, these homes collectively form an unparal-
leled vision of twentieth and twenty-first century life in Asia, Europe, and later
America.

So, here we have two Nobel laureates coming from the same geographic
area, belonging to the same thriving Bengali culture, writing more than 100
years apart, using—more or less—the same concepts to describe the importance
of cultural identity. What changed in these 100 years?

Terms like identity and belonging have been central threads within anthro-
pological research since its inception. In general terms, cultural identity refers to
a person’s sense of belonging to a particular culture. We often understand the
construction of identity in terms of gender, class, age and ethnicity, language,
and/or religion. But what happens when a person is forced to leave his/her cul-
ture and to live in a different environment, along with people never met before,
in a place where another language is spoken, and where God has a different
name? What does cultural identity mean to an immigrant? What does he/she
take from his/her own culture and what does identity look like for these people?
What does home mean? How are the home and the world related nowadays? Where
is the home in the world? And where in the world are we at home? It seems like a
game of words, but it hides more than we might think.

“Everyone belongs somewhere or with someone,” writes James Greenaway
in the Introduction to his recent volume on The Philosophy of Belongings, and
he continues: “we know, for example, that we belong to places and to times,
and we know that we belong to other people and to our communities.” But
in recent years, both familial and national belongings and identities have been
entwined with (im)migration and transnationalism. These topics have interested
me for quite some time, being closely linked to my scientific endeavors. Working
on different subjects, from the philosophy of culture, Indian studies, interwar history and the recovery of important documents belonging to the Jewish intellectuals of Romanian origin, the topic of what the home and the world mean for people in different regions was always on my mind. On the one hand, I was particularly interested in the voice of the subaltern, as described by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak\textsuperscript{5} in her essays, and in how the subaltern speaks and, most importantly, can be heard in our contemporary society. Things like cultural identity, belonging, immigration or exile are interconnected and together can offer a better understanding of our fractured world. On the other hand, the dynamics of migration have changed dramatically in the last 10 years. People all over the world are facing multiple constraints that force them to leave their countries: wars, natural calamities, political regimes or terror attacks are just a few of the issues of our modern world. All these have an important role in immigration and the need to find a safe place to live. They also define the current status of \textit{homo mundi}—the man of the world. Home is where the individual feels safe. The universal language of our times is not English anymore, but the understanding of the need to live without fear. Any immigrant’s story can develop an entire new philosophy of becoming, and the anthropology of belonging is, probably, the most important element of defining \textit{the home in the world}.

I won’t discuss these important issues in this essay, as my primary intention is only to offer some personal remarks on the Bengali sense of belonging, as my research is based on a couple of important writings of Bengali authors and also on my personal experiences from 2007, when India entered into my life, to 2024, when I had the honor of participating in the most important Bengali festival of literature, the Tata Steel Kolkata Literary Meet.\textsuperscript{6} As most of my visits to India included Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), I became familiar with the Bengali way of life. In 2009, I spent there six months, having received an iccr\textsuperscript{7} postdoctoral scholarship to study Rabindranath Tagore’s philosophy of religions at Jadavpur University. During my stay there, I was very much impressed with the strong sense of community and belonging even among the youngsters, many of them pursuing studies in the West. Being a Bengali is a matter of pride and joy, and most of them seem eager to share with others the essentials of belonging to the third largest ethno-linguistic group in the world.

After 2014, with the newly-created Cluj Center for Indian Studies (which I founded at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca) and with the beginning of scientific cooperation with Indian universities (among them, Jadavpur University of Kolkata), a number of Bengali students arrived at Babeş-Bolyai University. During their stay here, I noticed how they kept their sense of community.
They expressed their strong cultural identity primarily through language, fashion, food, and faiths, as important elements. In a way, they were uprooted, but they were part of the Bengali spirit more than ever before. These could have been their words, too:

*It is through our openness to the world and cultures other than our own, that we have evolved our Bengaliness that is so distinctive, so unique. It’s what makes us enduring, indolent, insular, outgoing, endearing, adventurous, gypsy-like, nesting, sentimental, adaptive, rebellious, questioning, accepting, and infuriating in turn—or all at once. To be anything else would probably be so very boring.*

In 2017, during the presence of Bengali students at Babeș-Bolyai University, we organized many cultural events, as they were eager to promote their culture. On one occasion, for the international day of poetry (21 March), there was a poetry recital in Bengali. It was for the first time that Rabindranath Tagore’s poems in the original Bengali were read in Cluj. The *Gitanjali* poems sounded like music and the students were proud and happy to share their own language with us. It was then that I truly understood that language is an important tool for every community, even a small one like that comprising our students. It is the language that keeps the traditions alive, and speaks about someone’s identity.

*Our homeland, geographical and linguistic, is spread across two countries, India and Bangladesh—literally the country of Bengalis, and their language, Bāngla. It’s a teeming, heaving, raucous space where empires have been won and lost, civilization celebrated and ground to dust, a place of lucid intellects, . . . where emotion seems to be as much a cachet as education.*

Through the language they expressed their emotions and it was in the language they were at home in Cluj.

For a Bengali, the language expresses, without any doubt, the profound sense of belonging. When asked about the language he dreams in, Amartya Sen answered spontaneously: “Bengali, mostly.”

*He is a citizen of the world, but this is how he affirms his identity. The roots are there, always. And they remain. But they also help the individual to spread his wings and ‘to conquer’ the world.*

For Amartya Sen, in particularly, “the power of argument” was always an important tool in conquering the world of academia, as he writes: “Our reasoned sympathy, across the borders of geography and time, may come from the strength
of our spontaneous affections or from the power of argument.” By argument he secured a place among the world’s most outstanding economists.

Bānglā has another important and distinct feature amongst Indian languages, which is a matter of great pride:

*The national anthem of India was written in Bengali, which happens to be my mother tongue and one of the major languages of India. It has to be sung in Hindi, as . . . the national anthem must be sung in the national language. No translation there. When the Indian national anthem is sung, some Bengalis sing loudly with a Bengali pronunciation and accent which is distinctly different from the Hindi pronunciation and accent, but the anthem remains Hindi, although it is Bengali,* recalls Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, another Bengali intellectual that conquered the world, and made it her home.

The Bengalis have many things to be proud of, as I could also see during my stays there. More than that, the Bengali Diaspora has an important role in all parts of our contemporary world. Bengalis are very competitive, and they try to express their rich culture through everything they do. The most important Bengali festivals, like the famous Durga Puja, included in the representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity in 2021, are now celebrated across the globe with the same fervor.

*Indeed, the Bengali Diaspora in all its shades is now already so diverse and vast that, in 2015, Kalyani University near Kolkata started a Centre for Bengali Diaspora.*

When the students from Kolkata were in Cluj, I became interested in how Bengalis managed to integrate in the countries they were living in and, at the same time, in how they succeeded to keep their specific Bengali identity and why this is important for the understanding of a community.

*Who or what is the Bengali, really, beyond a roiled history, schizophrenic emotion and heightened sense of self? What are the Bengali and the Bengali homelands all about, stereotypically and beyond stereotypes? What defines us? What are our defining moments? What makes us who we are?*

To respond to these questions, I tried to understand migration in the current context of globalization, linking the determinants of migration to structural changes in world markets and historical times. The so-called “World System
“Theory”—developed in the 1970s by the sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein as a replacement to modernization theory, thus, as a multidisciplinary, macro-scale approach to world history and social change which emphasizes the world system as the primary unit of social analysis—has been presently extended and the focus is (or should be) the culture of identity.

Different patterns can be seen and various cultural modes of connecting with the other can be pursued. For example, Mircea Eliade’s well-known *Patterns in Comparative Religion* could be reinterpreted in the light of the recent developments in world history (conflicts, pandemics, and calamities) as an important theoretical ground for explaining religious conversions as elements of integration and belonging. Eliade was another sincere admirer of the Bengali culture. In his writings, there are hundreds of pages of intricate descriptions of facts, people, places, feelings, books, and events, and many of them mention the Bengali household and the importance of the Bengali community.

In the same manner, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s subaltern studies can be approached from a different perspective, as in many cultures we can observe the empowerment of the unprivileged and the strong voice of female models. In fact, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s experience is more than eloquent, as she declared in her co-chaired lecture at Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca in 2022:

> that’s also a story of women’s education. As I said, we are examples. I mean my first job; I was not only the only person of color, but also the only female in a department with 65 white men. So, we are talking about a real change, not just in India, but also in the United States.

What is remarkable for Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s academic trajectory is her ability to expand and further explore her own experiences, not only those related to her work, but also the human interactions she had everywhere in the world, as she traveled and wrote extensively about the various environments, while comparing them, subtly, with her Bengali background.

*At home in the world* is something that Bengalis managed to experience. Identity is both inherited and self-constructed, and the Bengalis living abroad use all the existing tools to preserve their sense of belonging. Rabindranath Tagore belonged to the Bengali society of his time, a community that tried to find its own place in the new world that was about to be born. The present-day Bengalis belong to the globalized world, and they carry with them the love for the land of Bengal and their language, as well as some other specific elements of identity, such as festivals, faiths, films, and food. Bengali culture is, most probably, the richest of India.
Moreover, that Bengali, which belongs to the Indo-Aryan group of languages, is the predominant language of the land is indication that Hinduism, the religion of the Indo-Aryans, had the most influence over Bengal even though Buddhism, Jainism and later Islam established itself, followed in time by Christianity, Judaism and even to a much lesser extent Sikhism.¹⁹

A similar opinion is expressed by another Bengali writer. Sudeep Chakravarti writes in his peerless *The Bengalis: A Portrait of the Community*:

*The Bengali race and culture was more the result of an immense mixing, an aggregation of numerous races and religions which arrived in the subcontinent for survival and conquest.*²⁰

In a way, little has changed since Rabindranath Tagore wrote *Ghare Baire* in 1916. All his writings were inspired by the place he belonged to, the land of Bengal. He grew up in a very educated family and even from his childhood he was inspired by the *Upanishads*.

*They taught him how human beings can transcend themselves and get a glimpse of the Infinite. His knowledge was gradually enriched by the philosophy of Gītā, the teachings of Buddha, Christian tradition, and the fascinating universes of Bauls of Bengal or Sufi tradition. He also became intimate with the Bengal countryside and loved to spend time with people, learning from them, and finding inspiration in their simple life and genuine wisdom. From all of these, Tagore had drawn his complete and unique vision of the world.*²¹

Rabindranath Tagore’s views on society, in general, and the Bengali community, in particular, were extensions of his arguments about the public and private spheres. *The Home and the World* is, in a way, Tagore’s own testament of belonging. “Amar sonar Bangla”²² (My golden Bengal) is the ultimate declaration of the poet’s belonging to the Bengali culture.

As a young boy, Amartya Sen spent many of his early years in the school Tagore’s family had founded in Santiniketan, in the rural area of Bengal, in 1901, an institution that in just 18 years grew into a university, Visva-Bharati²³ (World and India), as a logical development of Tagore’s philosophy of education. Studying there, where his maternal grandfather Kshiti Mohan Sen, “a well-known scholar in Sanskrit and Indian philosophy,” was also teaching, exposed Amartya Sen to unconventional schooling methods, but also shaped his humanistic nature. Visva-Bharati “invoked the objective of uniting the world (*Visva*) with all the articulated wisdom (*Bharati*) it could offer.”²⁴ Tagore’s school was
the place where *the home* and *the world* were interconnected and the education within nature was focusing on both freedom and identity. In the case of Amartya Sen, being a student there was even more important, due to his personal connection with Rabindranath, as he recalls that

> when I was born, Rabindranath persuaded my mother that it was boring to stick to well-used names and he proposed a new name for me. Amartya, by inference, means immortal, in Sanskrit.\(^\text{25}\)

Santiniketan was Sen’s first *home in the world*, as his belonging to the Bengali identity was more than clearly assumed. It was in Santiniketan that Sen’s dedicated pursuit of Tagore’s thoughts began after the poet’s death, giving him a lifetime of rewarding engagement.

> In particular, his overarching emphasis on freedom and reasoning made me think seriously about those issues, which became increasingly important to me as I grew older.\(^\text{26}\)

The home follows us in the world, everywhere we go. Being at home in the world is something all humans have in common. Sharing one’s own culture while trying to fit into another is something that has challenged recent generations. The development of identity cultures in our contemporary world is extremely important, and the importance of language as an identity tool is significant. The home is, first, in the language. No matter where someone is in the world, in the language that person is at home. The Bengali sense of belonging, which I tried to focus on in this essay, is an entire multi-level philosophy of identity.

It is not surprising that the sense of belonging can be found not only in scholarly writings, but also in the fiction of internationally acclaimed Bengali-born authors like Anuradha Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri or Amitav Ghosh. *All the Lives We Never Lived*\(^\text{27}\) is Anuradha Roy’s beautiful story about family, identity and love. As Roy declared in a recent interview, “my own writing . . . is influenced by the Bengali literature I read.”\(^\text{28}\) But this particular novel is more than that, as it features characters from history who enter into the lives of the novel’s fictional characters, such as the poet Rabindranath Tagore, the singer Begum Akhtar, the dancer and critic Beryl de Zoete, and the German painter and curator Walter Spies, or the Bengali writer Maitreyi Devi, who was Roy’s aunt.

> Maitreyi Devi was my aunt, as her husband was my father’s first cousin, which . . . is considered a close relationship here. Her book came out in the 1970s when I was a
child and immediately became more or less contraband in our large, conservative joint family in Calcutta.  

All the Lives We Never Lived is the story of how families fall apart and of what remains in the aftermath. The Bengali sense of belonging is very much present in this novel, as it is also present in the famous The Namesake, by Jhumpa Lahiri, a miniature of a tiny family voyage between two worlds: Calcutta and Cambridge, Massachusetts. When the first baby arrives in the family,

as for a name, they have decided to let Ashima’s grandmother, who is past eighty now, who has named each of other six great-grandchildren in the world, do the honors.

This is the Bengali custom, so the Bengali identity is, again, stronger than anything else. The Shadow Lines, by Amitav Ghosh, recounts events in the history of the partition of India, the liberation movement, and other important moments that marked the history of India. It also provides details on the historical significance, feelings and some important issues of the Bengali Diaspora. The author writes about the sights, sounds, and scents of his beloved home and how his experiences there have influenced the way he views the entire world. In the end, The Shadow Lines is Ghosh’s quest for his own Bengali identity. This novel earned Ghosh the 1989 Sahitya Akademi Award for English. There are, of course, many other examples.

Each person describes herself/himself in terms of cultural identity. The Bengali community, from India or elsewhere, does the same, by creating a home in the world, through language, identity, history, memory, and other cultural tools. The Bengali sense of belonging is a plea for the discovery of one’s true identity and for keeping safe the home in a world that is facing so many different challenges. From the perspective of intellectual history, the remarks on the home and the world, mentioned in this essay, offer just a preview of the complex social, linguistic and cultural history of Bengal, and also speak about the importance of the Bengali voices that have conquered the world and made it their home.

Notes

1. Rabindranath Tagore (7 May 1861–7 August 1941) was the first Nobel laureate of Asia. In 1913 he received the prestigious prize for Gitanjali (Song offerings), his volume of poetry. The Nobel Prize motivation for awarding Tagore mentions:
“his profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse, by which, with consummate skill, he has made his poetic thought, expressed in his own English words, a part of the literature of the West.” See https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1913/tagore/facts/, accessed 9 January 2024. For a complete analysis of Tagore’s life and work, see Amartya Sen, “Tagore and His India,” The New York Review of Books 44, 11 (26 June 1997), also included in Amartya Sen, The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity (London: Penguin Books, 2005) from p. 121 onwards. It is interesting that this essay was chosen for the volume edited by Anders Hallengren, Nobel Laureates in Search of Identity and Integrity: Voices of Different Cultures (New Jersey etc.: World Scientific Publishing, 2004), 177–214, reaffirming, thus, Amartya Sen’s strong sense of belonging to the Bengali culture.


3. Amartya Sen (born 3 November 1933) is an Indian economist and philosopher, which in 1998 was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, “for his contributions to welfare economics.” “Sen’s studies have included famines, to create a deeper understanding of the economic reasons behind famine and poverty.” https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/economic-sciences/1998/sen/facts/, accessed 9 January 2024.


5. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (born 24 February 1942) is a Bengali-born professor of Humanities at Columbia University, and a founding member of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society. On 23 June 2022, Professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was awarded the title of Doctor Honoris Causa of Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca. Her acceptance discourse can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohhSfIC6Qlo.

6. Between 23 and 27 January 2024, I participated in the 12th Tata Steel Kolkata Literary Meet (Kalam), organized in association with Victoria Memorial Hall Kolkata. The full program of the festival is available here: https://kolkatalitmeet.in/2024/

7. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) was founded in 1950 by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, independent India’s first education minister. Its objectives are to actively participate in the formulation and implementation of policies and programs pertaining to India’s external cultural relations. For more details, see https://www.iccr.gov.in/. accessed 9 January 2024.


13. “*Durga Puja* is an annual festival celebrated in September or October, most notably in Kolkata. . . . The festival is characterized by large-scale installations and pavilions in urban areas, as well as by traditional Bengali drumming and veneration of the goddess. During the event, the divides of class, religion and ethnicities collapse as crowds of spectators walk around to admire the installations.” https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/durga-puja-in-kolkata-00703, accessed 9 January 2024.
15. Chakravarti, xxvi.
22. “*Amar sonar Bangla*” (“My golden Bengal”) was adopted as the national anthem of Bangladesh (after the country declared its independence from Pakistan in 26 March 1971). An ode to the Mother Bengal, the song was written by Rabindranath Tagore in 1905 during the first partition of Bengal, when the ruling British Empire had the undivided province of Bengal Presidency split into two parts: East Bengal and Assam (with a majority of Muslims) and West Bengal (with a majority of Hindus).
23. Visva-Bharati University continues today Tagore’s family vision, for a school in which the home and the world are integrated in order to offer a complete education. See https://visvabharati.ac.in/History.html, accessed 9 January 2024.
25. Sen, 8.
Abstract
At Home in the World: Remarks on the Bengali Sense of Belonging

Two Nobel laureates coming from the same geographic area, writing more than 100 years apart, using—more or less—the same concepts to describe the importance of cultural identity. What changed in these 100 years? Generally understood, cultural identity refers to a person’s sense of belonging to a particular culture. We often understand the construction of identity in terms of gender, class, age and ethnicity, language, and/or religion. But what happens when a person is forced to leave his/her culture and to live in a different environment, alongside people never met before, in a place where another language is spoken, and where God has a different name? What does cultural identity mean? How are the home and the world related nowadays? Where is home in the world? This essay views the Bengali sense of belonging in the current context of globalization, linking the determinants of the Bengali culture to the structural changes in the world.

Keywords
home, world, Rabindranath Tagore, Amartya Sen, the Bengali community, language, cultural identity, globalization