

Remembering Tagore: His Times and his Multifaceted Creativity

Rabindranath Tagore in his autobiography, ‘My Reminiscences’ (*Jibansmriti*, 1912) and ‘My Boyhood Days’ (Chhelebela, 1940) speaks about his birth in 1861 at a great period of history when the currents of three movements had met in the life of our country:

1) The first movement was a religious movement introduced by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, a great hearted man of gigantic intelligence, who fought against orthodoxy to reopen the age old channel of spiritual life. Tagore’s father Maharshi Debendranath Thakur joined this movement and was ostracized by the society. He became an ascetic early in his life and remained deeply involved in spiritual pursuits and came to be known as Maharshi, a great seer. He impacted Tagore in a big way to the path of Upanishads and spirituality and provided him one of the fundamental metaphors in his poetic creativity.

What distinguishes Tagore from other great poetical genius of his time is the unity of inspiration described so insightfully in his poetry:

‘The Infinite wants the finite’s intimate comradeship
And the finite wishes to lose itself in the Infinite.’

But the father and the son had a big difference of approach to life. Maharshi Debendranath Tagore would never like spiritual puritan ethics to be intertwined with joy of life whereas Tagore would by referring to the first mantra of Isopanishad would always say, rejoice and renounce.

W.B.Yeats, therefore, made a comment about Tagore that he is the only saint who did not refuse to live. This is also diametrically opposite to what Gandhi said to an English journalist when asked to give in five words, the meaning of life, Gandhi said, why five I will give you in three words, renounce and rejoice. However the father, according to two autobiographical account suggests, never seriously interfered with Rabindranath's autonomy except in only one thing the father was uncompromising about taking bath in cold water; Rabindranath says that even at Dalhousie, in the Himalayas, he had to bathe in icy cold water.

2) Second movement was a literary movement initiated by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, who brought freedom in literary style, created new forms and took our literature to new heights in strength and grace. Tagore's inherent poetic creativity automatically moved towards the world of literature. Jyotirindranath Tagore was the first person to offer young Rabindranath a model of patriotic zeal and fervour and intense capacity for artistic expression together

with a style of creativity which borrowed uninhibitedly from both the East and the West. It was Jyoti who introduced Rabindranath to the world of politics and the arts and it is his wife Kadambari Devi who was the first to recognise Rabindranath's immense creative talent and give Rabindranath, deeply unsure of his writing, confidence to himself.

She introduced Rabi to Biharilal, the most popular poet of Bengal those days whom even Rabi liked both as a man and a poet. Chitra Dev in her fascinating narration of 'Women of the Tagore Household' says that Kadambari not only nurtured the lamp of Rabi's genius but lit up the wick and disappeared into the darkness. How did it happen? She committed suicide within four months of Tagore's marriage to a 10 year girl Bhabatarini, quite thin, not good looking and almost illiterate whose name was changed to Mrinalini by Tagore's elder brother Dwijendranath.

Maharshi Debendranath was quite radical in his religious beliefs but rarely so in matters of social behaviour.

Why Kadambari, his sister-in-law committed suicide? There are various answers which I would not like to discuss in this paper except what Tagore said about her with a deep tinge of sorrow and tenderness, 'I was very fond of her. She

also loved me a lot. It is this love that has attuned my heart to the Bengali women.' He wrote:

*Nayano samukhe tumi nai
Nayanero majkhane niyechho je thnai*
'You are no longer before my eyes
You have taken up abode in the midst of my eyes.'

In the course of time Tagore developed deep love for his wife, whom he called 'chhoto bau' (little bride), 'chuti' (holiday) and 'my little wife' and wrote in a letter in 1890 from Europe, 'I became restless thinking of seeing you again.' In another letter in 1898 he said, 'May the two of us remain to the very end sure refuges for each other's world-weary heart' and in another letter in 1900, 'if you sweeten my life with your love and care...your efforts will be precious to me.'

The Metaphor of Death

She gave birth to Bela, the first child of them at the age of 13 and subsequently four more children and died at the age of 29 within 19 years of their marriage. Tagore's family life was, for the most part, tragic.

After the death of his wife his daughter, Renuka, died in 1903. Later he lost his youngest son, Shamindranath, his eldest daughter Bela, and his only grandson.

In all these deaths particularly in his wife's death Tagore saw death as conjoined with life which triumphs so beautifully (amrita se-mritu hote daao tumi ani).

This notion of death is so poignantly but beautifully described in his most popular play 'The Post Office' (Dakghar), which is staged and being staged all over the world even today. When Hitler's Nazi army attacked Paris in the beginning of the 2nd World war, the Radio Paris was that time broadcasting the French translation of Andre Gide's 'The Post Office' and in Hitler's Jewish ghetto in Poland, a well known doctor, writer and director Korczak, directed and staged this play with the help of some of the 200 orphan children, who were under his care, knowing well that very soon his and their life would end in gas chamber. When Korczak was asked by someone, why did he select this play, his reply was that he wanted to give the message to the children as how to accept the angel of death in peace.

3) The third movement was national movement which was not political in its initial form but mostly an assertion of our identity and a voice of indignation at the humiliation heaped upon us by the colonial rulers by desecrating our culture and disdainfully rejecting our works of art, literary creativity and knowledge as creation of an inferior culture

and bringing a divide between our people as irrational primitive and enlightened western oriented modern. The leaders of this movement or revolt belong to Tagore's own family, his brothers and cousins who discovered the universal, everlasting values in our ancient texts, Vedas and Upanishads and in the medieval devotional poets like Kabir, Nanak, Dadu, Vasavanna and Vaishnava poets and also a message of humanism in the Indian folk songs and folk religious expressions like Bauls of Bengal. This national movement, on one side, induced Tagore's family to establish a patriotic Hindu mela in 1860, a fair to promote indigenous goods, ideas and infuse love for the Indian products and sale of those and Hindu-Muslim unity. On the other side, on the analogy of Italy's guru of unification and freedom, Giuseppe Mazzini (1805 -1872) and his associate, Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882) Jyotindranath, the elder brother of Tagore and his young friends and cousins established a secret society '*Sanjivini Sabha*' and under the auspicious of that Rabindranath Tagore wrote fiery songs to raise the passion of the people against the 1905 Bengal partition.

Rabindranath: The Lonely Boy

Before I further elaborate this issue let us recapitulate his younger days as a boy he grew up by reciting the mantras

of the Upanishads and when he became a little older he showed his genuine deep love for English literature particularly Shakespeare, Walter Scott and the English Romantics but his adoration for Indian literature particularly Kalidasa and Vaishnava poets, Vidyapati, Kabir, Vasavanna and Dadu was in no way eclipsed by his interest in English literature..

Being the youngest of the fourteen children of his parents he had to spend his days mostly in the company and under the strict vigilance of servants and felt extremely lonely and forsaken. On Tagore's centenary celebrations in 1961, Satyajit Ray made a feature film on Tagore. In that there was a scene of young Tagore standing at the back of a window covered with iron bars as if he was imprisoned in a jail and young Tagore was looking restless and eager to be freed from this enclosed environment so that he could be one with the earth, its flowing river and the wind, in fact with nature. Tagore loved nature and always desired to absorb the loneliness of the vast pulsating nature with its growing trees, dark forest and flying birds.

Tagore gave his acceptance speech for the Nobel prize award for his slim book of songs, Gitanjali or 'Song Offerings' on 26 May 1921 after a gap of 8 years in Stockholm. Tagore in fact received the award in Calcutta in a function on 29th Jan 1914 from Lord Carmichael, Governor of Bengal as he could not attend the Nobel

Award Ceremony on 10 Dec 1913 at Stockholm but sent a telegram accepting the prize which was declared on 13 Nov 1913. In his acceptance speech Tagore said,

“On that day at night when the telegraphic message came about the award of the Nobel Prize to me, I sat upon the terrace alone and asked myself the question:

What could be the reason of my poems being accepted by the West in spite of my belonging to a different race, parted and separated by seas and mountains from the children of the West?”

Tagore then attempted to trace out the source of his creativity and also the reasons for his acceptance by the West. He said,

“His life in his young days was spent in absolute seclusion in the company of wild ducks, flowing river, sunshine and starry nights.”

Infinite Peace and Feeling of the Eternal

Tagore thought that no poet of the West could have spent his days in such seclusion because seclusion itself has no place in the Western world. He further thought that West in their overactive life had a thirst for the infinite peace and feeling of the eternal and that what they had found out in his poetry.

Then he decided to come out from seclusion and do some work for his fellow beings by teaching their children. His love for nature opened up his love for children. His objective was to give freedom and joy to children and men. He created a school in 1903 and named it Shantiniketan, ‘an abode of peace’ where the world meets in one nest:

‘Yatra viswam bhavet eka nidam’.

During his stay there working for the school which later turned into an university and named it Visva-Bharati, Tagore found peace in the silence of the afternoon watching the trees of the shadowing avenue, in the chats and songs of the children filling the air with a spirit of delight, in the bosom of the infinite sky, under the glorious stars of the silent night, he wrote the poems of Gitanjali and the west accepted him. He was hailed by W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and others as a great poet from the East and others found in him the imprint of god. They found in his poetry offerings from finite to infinite.

Struge Moor, after hearing Tagore’s reading of his poems at Rothenstein’s residence had remarked to W.B.yeats that the poems are preposterously optimistic. To this Yeats replied,

Ah! You see he is absorbed in God.

This peace and the feeling of the eternal is possible if one tries to understand the unity of mankind- an idea which was

so much needed for people to realize during that time in the war ravage Europe and even today in the world.

Tagore said in his acceptance speech that the spirit of unity of all races is the message of the East to the West and quoted Upanishads to establish his point:

“He who sees all beings in his self, and his self in all the beings does not hate any one, and knows the truth”

In the unity of beings one realizes the spirit, *atma*. Hence, while defining modernity in his own terms, he had no hesitation to declare in Beijing in 1924 that

‘The impertinence of material things is extremely old. The revelation of spirit in man is modern. I am in its side, I am modern.’

Revelation of Spirit in man is the core philosophy of Tagore. Tagore’s was not the lone voice during those days. Jose Ortega Y Gasset, considered to be the greatest Spanish philosopher of the modern time, developed a philosophical system known as ‘ratiovitalism’ had said clearly that modernity brought two common elements

Disorientation and
Dehumanization in poetry

and then affirmed that artisans are recognized by their tools. The poetical tools of the Bengali poet Tagore resembled the universal propositions of philosophy.

Rabindranath is not in need of anything historical and sumptuary, particular to his time or his land.

With a little of sun,
With sky and clouds,
With mountain and thirst,
With storms and river banks,
With a door and frame of window from
which to look out,
and above all, with all a loving favour
for God,
He produces his songs.

This lyric poetry thus consists of universal things which are and have been everywhere and transforms it into a bird eager to sing from every branch. Then Ortega includes a sentence of Tagore,
‘In the creation of God, nothing has an end. All which is true remains.’

Unity of Mankind

In 1922 in Pune in the Kirlosker Theatre he gave a lecture on Indian Renaissance, elaborating the same idea as was mentioned in his acceptance speech, the Bengali version of that is titled: ‘shikkhar milan’, he said that a man who is alone or one is meaningless because there is no unity in one. The one with many is truly one because in that one can see the unity and this unity gives the message of truth.

In his receiving the noble prize tremendous exuberance was shown during that time and Tagore was accepted as the messenger of peace, unity of mankind and transcendentalism who found God in nature- a messenger from the orient belonging to a culture of the other.

But very soon the exuberance faded away. In the words of Professor Dimock, Tagore, after receiving the Nobel Prize in 1913 and thereafter for about two decades, flashed across the Western skies like a comet and like a comet he disappeared and again like a comet he made his appearance in the 1960s of the last century when the children of the neo romantics like

Aane Akhmatova and Donald S. Harrington and others found in him a sympathetic voice of

1)anti- materialism,
2) adored his vision of the spiritual, and
3) his search for beauty in man and nature which were very much familiar to them and also his late poetry which became less and less poetry, more and more unadorned human voice and his journey towards greater and greater honesty attracted them.

Like a comet he appears again though a little dimmed with time. Today, it seems to me that Tagore's effort in raising

in us the consciousness of the Asian identity is bearing fruit. Asian soil has mastered the trick of trapping eternity somewhere, somehow. The Asian identity is just not poverty and suffering but an endless quest for inner peace and spiritual freedom that binds mankind together.

This idea of human unity goes against any kind of violence to human beings and also the western notion of the other and rejection of freedom of man. Tagore posited the idea that the history of the growth of freedom is the history of the perfection of human relationship. In fact i) freedom and ii) unity of mankind are the two voices of Tagore which are two very important aspects of India's civilizational values.

The East and the West

Tagore never had any narrow approach related to humanity. In his novel 'Home and the World' Tagore justified this view:

"I do not think that it is the spirit of India to reject anything, reject any race, and reject any culture. The spirit of India has always proclaimed the ideal of unity..... We must discover the most profound unity, the spiritual unity between the different races. We must go deeper down to the spirit of man and find out the great bond of unity, which is to be found in all human races.... Man is not to fight with

other human races, other human individuals, but his work is to bring about reconciliation and peace and restore the bonds of friendship and love.”

And so he could ‘In creative Unity’ end his essay with a rebuttal of the imperialist notions of incompatibility voiced by Rudyard Kipling.

“It is true that they (East & West) are not showing any real sign of meeting. But the reason is because the West has not sent out its humanity to meet the man in the East but only its machine. Therefore, the poet’s line has to be changed into something like this: Man is man, Machine is Machine and never the twain shall wed”.

The Other

The idea of the East as some shadowy, threatening ‘other’ with which the West is in sharp conflict, and the essentialising of East and West into two simple and contrastive categories has a long history and can be traced back to the time of Herodotus but that history is now a past history. Sartre’s famous statement ‘hell is the other’ carries a strong echo of Hegel, who always defines one’s identity as identity against the other either to be appropriated or to be destroyed.

But the Western mind knows well that if he succeeds in completely subjugating the ‘other’, the identity of his

own self becomes dubious. He wants to become whole by destroying the other but without the other, he becomes nothing. For Tagore the ‘other’ was never a source of reference to define one’s own identity as it was for the Europeans. The self was always accepted as self referential, the other was never a threat to their identity, nor a source of confirmation of their uniqueness.

The concept of human unity so assiduously nurtured by Tagore is now at the centre of philosophical discussion in the West.

Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, the most celebrated philosophers of the contemporary world, discuss this issue of the self and the other in detail. Levinas says, ‘The foundation of ethics consists in the obligation to respond to the other.’ ‘In being for the other only the sense of responsibility (goodness, mercy, charity) calls forth.’

For Derrida, the foundation of ethics is hospitality, the readiness and the inclination to welcome the other into one’s home.

Levinas’s and Derrida’s theories of ethics – responsibility and hospitality- no doubt, reveal a new consciousness emerging in the West about its relationship with the East

but the view of the West is still just a broad view of particularism and is still linear and binary and so Huntington writes about the clash of civilizations between Western and Muslim civilizations each forcefully confronting the other and hence they are confused by Tagore's own description of his Bengali family as the product of a confluence of three cultures:

Hindu, Mohammedan and British.

The spirit of India believes in the ideal of unity – it does not reject – comprehends all with love and sympathy.

Let us not forget that just three years before he wrote 'Gitanjali'; he had written the famous novel 'Gora' which gives a most vivid account of the most anguished debates which were raging within the Hindu society at the beginning of the 20th century, no less passionate and self searching than what Thomas Mann was to depict later in his famous novel 'The Magic Mountain' concerning the dark and troubled state of European civilization. Two novels about two destinies.

Thomas Mann broods over the threatened collapse of the civilized values, which constitute the identity of Europe. Tagore, on the other hand, reflecting over the crisis of

Hindu identity which is being threatened precisely by those ‘civilized values’ of Europe which were being forced on a society that had no choice but to accept or reject them. This is the message of Gora and Tagore’s approach to Western civilization and the realization of India’s identity.

Gora in his journey from communalism, sectarianism, religious conservatism to the ideals of humanism says at the end of the novel;

“For me there is nothing bigger than my country- I am not beyond the pain and happiness, knowledge and ignorance of the total India. In me exists both Hindu and Muslim- All the casts of India are my cast.”

Here the spirit is to acknowledge the whole world as one’s family as conceived in the Vedic discourse: *vasudhaiva kutumbukam*. This is definitely different from what the Greek philosopher Diogenes of Sinope, said in 412 BC, ‘I am a citizen of the world’ because it does not in any prove one’s identity as a member of a family. This is India’s all-embracing age old vision of human unity or universal humanity.

A belief was created during the colonial time and still continuing in the post-colonial time that progressive West is universal and the regressive East is particular. This kind

of a notion of cultural uniqueness goes against the concept of human unity so assiduously nurtured by Tagore by introducing the notion of universal humanity in his poem ‘Bharattirtha’

‘Oh my mind, awake heroically on the shores of the ocean of universal humanity.’

Tagore’s opinion was clear that first try to understand what is good in others and that would help in regaining one’s selfhood and hence in his lecture ‘*purba o paschim*’ he said,

“At every turn - in her laws and customs, in her religions and social institutions – India today deceives and insults herself. Meeting of East and West on our soils will succeed when there will be inner harmony between the two is achieved.

“In Indian history, the meeting of the Muscleman and the Hindu produced Akbar, the object of whose dream was the unification of hearts and ideals.”

Violence

Tagore’s one of the central preoccupations in his writings was to raise his voice against violence which he thought was a crime committed against humanity.

The best example of his description of violence with full of pain and suffering is to be seen in his letter to the viceroy in 1919 while relinquishing his knighthood or in his

travelogue '*Parashya*' in which he relates the penchant description of a Christian chaplain, attached to a British air force division stationed at Bhagdad, as how extremely easy to kill so many people dwelling in the desert by ferocious aerial bombing without any fear of repercussion. When asked for a message by the Christian chaplain he wrote, ‘Man has accepted this dust-laden earth for his dwelling place, for the enacting of the drama of his tangled life ever waiting for a call of perfection from the boundless depth of purity surrounding him in a translucent atmosphere. If in an evil moment man’s cruel history should spread its black wings to invade that realm of divine dreams with its cannibalistic greed and fratricidal ferocity then God’s curse will certainly descend upon us for that hideous desecration and the last curtain will be rung down upon the world of Man for whom God feels ashamed.’”

It is his complete apathy towards violence that he was so much against nationalism based on the concept of a nation-state which does not hesitate to kill in the name of sovereignty of a nation and rather goes for universal humanism. In the 1905 Bengal Partition Movement Tagore initially had a radical approach and a song composed by him during that time had a tremendous impact on the minds of the participants of the movement:

In the dry river the water in flood has entered, just call the name of mother and row your boat

The famous Bengali essayists Rajendra Sunder Trivedi said about the song that what to talk of rowing the boat one felt like jumping in the river Ganges singing this very song.

In the year 1906 the middle-aged Bipin Chandra Pal of the Pal- Bal-Lal trio of our freedom struggle movement singing this very song held the rein of the horse of police superintendent Kemp, who with a baton in his hand was leading a police force to stop a street procession of the nationalist Indians.

During these days the poet read a paper ‘Avastha and byavastha’(problem and solution) in the Calcutta town hall in which he advocated the policy of establishing a parallel govt and said,

The terrifying image of the protector may protect us. We don’t want charity – strike.

He wrote many songs during that time betraying similar ideas. There could be two reasons for the manifestation of this kind of militant nationalism. One was of course Jyotirindranath Tagore, his elder brother, who organised secret meetings for spreading the message of nationalistic militancy in which Tagore also participated but more than that, and it is my hunch, that Tagore was influenced by

another, one of the greatest figures of his time, Swami Vivevekananda, who sang Tagore songs in Brahmasamaj gatherings such as ‘I have made you the polestar of my life’ (tomarai koreachi jibaner dhrubatara) or ‘The sky is the platter and the sun and moon are the lighted lamps’ (gaganer thale rabi-chandra-deepak jwale). Tagore met Narendranath Dutta turned Vivekananda in a tea party arranged by sister Nibedita on 27th Jan1899 but must have exchanged glances then conversing with each because Tagore knew about Vivekananda’s firm belief that the literary creativity of the house of Tagors is not conducive for the development of masculinity in man. Swamiji would always say, in the present Indian condition forgetting the soft, sweet taste of poetry would not do us any harm. The hard truth is like the death image of Mother kali and not the happy love image of Krishna with flute in his hand. Then Swamiji made the most powerful statement, ‘Yes! The older I grow, the more everything seems to me to lie in manliness. That is my new gospel.’

Tagore was totally against idol worship and hence he was not favourable towards Swami Vivekananda but he had personally noticed the tremendous revolutionary impact of Swamiji on the youth of India and after the death of Swami Vivekananda in 1902 Tagore spoke in high terms to Dilip Kumar Roy about Swamiji’s acute sense of self respect. Tagore also recognised the great impact which Swamiji had

on the awakening of the fighting spirit among the enslaved Indians and himself started writing poetry of militancy during the Bengal partition agitation (see Vivekananda o Samakaleen Bharatbarsha, Shankari Prasad Basu, vols iv, v, vi and vii.).

Tagore, an ardent advocate of the Bengal partition movement however withdrew his active participation because of disillusionment over the political exploitation of the Hindu-Muslim conflict and the realization about the movement turning violent.

In fact his love for the country, on one side

- i) called for the acceptance of a radical social programme as described in his essay ‘byadhi o pratikar’ (Malady and Cure,1907) against the divisive forces of caste, creed, poverty, and alienation between the elite and the masses and thus moved towards a more abiding freedom than what the political movement could attain and
- ii) on the other side his approach to nation and nationalism was very different. He remained anti-imperialist all through his life but went against any kind of violent or narrow nationalism and spoke about a world-embracing and inclusive nationalism which became the basis of Pt. Nehru’s vision of India’s future as a liberal secular democracy.

For Tagore India's unity was a social reality. It was not a political agenda. At the back of his participation in the Hindu mela from the age of 14 to his renouncing the knighthood after the Jalianwala Bagh massacre at the age of 58 and even after that his anti-imperialist viewpoints forcefully displayed in his last stirring lecture 'The Crisis in Civilization' at the age of 80 in which he mentioned the impertinent challenge by the imperial ruler to our conscience there was no politics. His anti-imperial disposition was a universal struggle for political justice and cultural dignity and a protest against violence.

In his classic autobiography, *Errata: An Examined Life*, George Steiner, one of the foremost philosophers of the 20th century, wrote:

It is possible to suppose that the period since August 1914 has been, notably in Europe and Russia, from Madrid to Moscow, from Sicily to the Arctic Circle, the most bestial in recorded history (Steiner, 1997:103).

Steiner's epitaph to the essential tragedy of the 20th century may well serve as a postscript to Rabindranath's critique of nationalism. Indeed, it would be logical to infer that much of the cause for the human grief, pain and humiliation in the 20th Century, can be attributed to the conflicting claims of Nation States. Far from acting as an instrument for realizing

collective or communitarian aspirations and welfare, nationalism has tragically led to collective despair.

Tagore undoubtedly was a powerful critic of worshipping the Nation as God and was horrified by the crimes committed by modern nation-states. Yet he loved the land that had nurtured him and never abandoned a basic anti-colonial or anti-imperialistic stance and even gave up his knighthood for the heinous crime committed by the British in 1919 by killing the unarmed peaceful people in Jalianwala Bagh in Amritsar, India. However he simply did not want Indian patriots to imitate European nationalists. It is not without reason that Mahatma Gandhi in his obituary comment on Rabindranath Tagore in 1941 lauded the poet as ‘an ardent nationalist’.

Today the new reading of nationalism by Tagore looks so relevant because of disastrous consequences of the prevalent notion of nationalism which we witnessed in the world :

- i) In the name of nationalism in the West ethnic nationalism unfolded itself resulting in two world wars;
- ii) In India nationalism has turned into ethnic politics which is creating all kind of problems for India;
- iii) Nationalism is spreading terrorism;
- iv) In the name of nationalism one finds deaths and conflicts in the 3rd world countries of Asia and Africa;

v) The countries of Africa fought against colonialism and racialism to regain their freedom and the spirit of nationalism but now the net result of that is that these countries have become dens of corruption, cruelty and insolence;

The West is now seriously thinking has nation-state failed? Post colonial critics such as Ernest Gallner, Benedict Andrson, Tom Nairn or Frantz Fanon have pointed out how nationalism cultivates the sentiments of irrationality, prejudice and hatred in people.

The detailed analysis of cosmopolitanism by Isaiah Berlin and Ashis Nandy and also Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen indicates that the world view is strongly in favour of how to break boundaries by rejecting exclusive nationalism and establish universal nationalism which is very much possible as says Tagore that “a culture could reflect universal ideas, without a loss of national identity”.

Though globalization tends to go for one homogenized culture by appropriation, co-option and homogenization even then a fierce debate is continuing for the last 30 years to speak in favour of particularism and exceptionalism. Amartya Sen by quoting Tagore says that Tagore’s everlasting credit is that his great cosmopolitan vision never sacrificed the richest possible sense of tradition. His actual words are,

“The main point of cosmopolitanism, which is taken to be world-citizenship claim, need not militate against valuing elements in one’s own tradition. It is particular cultural traditions that can provide the bases for understanding and morally relating to others and ultimately a vision of universality is developed.”

Both Gandhi and Tagore were nationalist with a difference. Gandhi accepted nationalism because he wanted to use it as a way to internationalism and hence he would say our battle for freedom is to bring peace in the world. Tagore did not accept nationalism which is bound with the concept of nation state. If one understands Tagore’s view that India’s unity is a social fact, not a political agenda then it becomes easy to understand that for Tagore universal nationalism is an inclusive plural concept of a nation which goes beyond the idea of exclusive nationalism and where the whole earth is a family.

The dialogue between Gandhi and Tagore was the most important aspect of Tagore’s time. Both had admiration, love and regard for each other but differed on issues like, non-cooperation movement or charkha or burning of foreign goods or use of English or rejection of science and technology or the Bihar earthquake which according to

Gandhi was due to our sin for following the practice of untouchability.

Tagore was apprehensive that passive resistance will turn violent; spinning of the wheel would not generate ideas and that our poverty was not due to our lack of sufficient thread but due to our lack of vitality, our lack of unity; and burning of clothes will hurt our economy. Tagore was disturbed not so much for Gandhi's opposition to English as for calling Raja Rammohan Roy, a champion of English education, a pygmy though Gandhi retracted from his original statement available in the collected works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. xix, pp. 476-78 and published a revised version in Young India now collected in Vol. xx, pp. 42-43 by deleting the derogatory word 'Pygmy' but without shifting from his original stand against English education. Tagore in a letter to C.F. Andrews from Zurich on May 10, 1921 said, The Mahatma believed Rammohan Roy was limited by his excessive familiarity with English but on the contrary he "had the comprehensiveness of mind to be able to realise the fundamental unity of spirit in the Hindu, Muhammadan and Christian cultures. Therefore he represented India in the fullness of truth, and this truth is based, not upon rejection, but on perfect comprehension. Rammohan Roy could be perfectly natural in his acceptance of the West, not only because his education had

been perfectly Eastern — he had the full inheritance of the Indian wisdom. He was never a school boy of the West, and therefore he had the dignity to be the friend of the West.” Stung by the criticism Gandhi immediately published his reply in ‘Young India’ and made that famous oft quoted statement, “I hope I am as great a believer in free air as the great Poet. I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any”.

But the most interesting dialogue that took place between them, when Gandhi called Tagore in an article in ‘Young India of 27 April 1921, ‘The Great Sentinel’ but defended non-cooperation movement and charka, as a means of livelihood to many poor people and said in the end, “I found it impossible to soothe suffering patients with a song from Kabir. The hungry millions ask for one poem invigorating food.”

Tagore In his speech on “Call of Truth” at the University Institute in Calcutta spoke against it. He said, “When the early bird awakens, its awakening is not merely for the purpose of looking for food. Its two untiring wings accept the call of the sky. The joy of seeing the light makes him burst out into song. The consciousness of the universal man of today calls out to our consciousness.”

Mahatma Gandhi in his reply in “Young India” chose to point only to that bird which flies in the sky early in the morning and said,” But I have had the pain of watching birds that for want of strength could not be coaxed into a flutter of their wings.”

But both had the decency to oppose each other with dignity and respect. Tagore would call Gandhi, ‘Mahatma’ and Gandhi called the poet ‘Gurudev’. In the only poem which Tagore wrote on Gandhi, a little over six months before his death, he called himself one of those who had the mark of Gandhi on their brow. On Tagore’s death on 7th August 1941, Gandhi said in his message of condolence that there was hardly any public incident that took place without the impact of Tagore’s strong personality. The unfortunate tendency among the modern historians to reduce the Gandhi-Tagore debate, which according to Nehru were the great debates of the 20th century, into a very simplistic version of a debate between superstitions versus rational thinking or the darkness of tradition versus the enlightenment of modernity or East versus West .

In spite of their differences on issues like non-cooperation movement Tagore created a prototype of Gandhi, Dhanjaya Bairagi, expressing his profound faith in the Gandhian ideal of a non- violent passive resistance movement. Similarly on the irrational statement made by Gandhi on the Bihar

earthquake Tagore was very critical but when he found people are unnecessarily rubbing this point and criticizing him Tagore out of pain and anger issued a statement:

‘To one really great, the real adulation as well as the cheap sneers of the mob mean very little and I know Mahatmaji carries that greatness with him.’

There were no debates to prove one’s superiority but only dialogues more to understand each other. Their differences were fundamental but their tributes to each other were unreserved. After all both were spiritual associates in their common task of regenerating their people. Both wore their differences rather lightly and showed their love and admiration more deeply, Once Gandhi requested Tagore to spin the charkha, Tagore immediately responded, you write a poem, I shall spin the wheel.

Tagore never ceased to remind us that he was first and foremost a poet. The French noble laureate, St. John Perse spoke about Tagore that he lived his poem and lived it integrally with all the integrity of man and of life.

Tagore once wrote to his young niece Indira, ‘In my life I may have done many things that were unworthy, with or without knowing, but in my poetry I have never uttered anything false; it is the sanctuary for the deepest truths I know.’ He had kept his promise to himself.

He also told her: ‘How I cherish light and space! Goethe on his death-bed wanted “more light”. If I am capable of expressing my desire, my dream, my vision then, it will be for more light and more space’.