

## YORK LECTURE

02 October,2013

As I have already discussed with Professor Mahendra Kumar Verma, I shall base my presentation on Nikhil Kaushik's video film on Tagore. This short film, which we saw just now, gave a brief but panoramic picture of Tagore's life, his time and writings. I will pick up certain cues from the film and elaborate those in my presentation and bring at the same time Gandhi and his debates with Tagore and their companionship. Today is Gandhi's 144 birth day and this year is Tagore's 152 birth year.

Let me first speak on the point of convergence among the three great poets of distinction from different geo-cultural spheres, Rabindranath Tagore (India) , Pablo Neruda (Chile) and Aime Cesaire (France, Martinique), who were identified by UNESCO in 2011 as has been said said in the video film about a programme over the course of three years to mark the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the birth of Rabindranath Tagore in 2011, to devote to the activities around the poet Pablo Neruda in 2012, and to celebrate the final year, 2013 as the 100th anniversary of the Tagore's Nobel Prize as well as the birth of Aimé

Césaire in addition to the 40th anniversary of the death of Pablo Neruda.

All these three poets, activists and historic figures wore their affiliations on their sleeves, were able to respond to the burdens of history in their time, from the second half of the nineteenth century (Tagore was born in 1861) to the early twenty-first century (with the death of Césaire in 2008).

Their activism and literary work challenged the contradictions of an unequal and unfair world system and developed a new understanding of their society and the world in order to establish a concrete and universal humanism. The work and paths of these three major writers are a reflection at the highest level of the interrelationship between the universal and the particular in understanding the complex processes of modernity. This notion of the particular and the universal gives rise to the acute issue of otherness. Tagore's concept of cosmopolitanism which is now widely discussed by social scientists like Martha Nussbaum, Isaih Berlin, Amartya Sen, Ashis Nandi and others involves both universal and the particular. Amartya Sen says that it is Tagore's everlasting credit that his great cosmopolitan vision never sacrificed the richest possible

sense of tradition or particular. Rabindranath Tagore had said the same thing several times in his *own words*, in a letter to a friend in 1921, “...but by nature all men are dwija or twice born.... first they are born to their home, and then, for their fulfillment, they have to be born to the larger world”. In a letter to another friend in 1934 he added “Individuality is precious, because only through it can we realize the universal.”

Aimé Césaire, the father of Negritude has said that the universal is reached by a deeper exploration of the particular. “We have never regarded our specificity as the opposite or antithesis of universality. Our concern has always been a humanist concern and we wanted it to have roots,” said the poet from Martinique. And Pablo Neruda, in a lecture given at UNESCO in 1972, when he was Permanent Delegate of Chile, said “I am far from being an individualist – I believe that man is only free to the extent that he is a collectivist.” This idea had appeared in his 1945 poem Song to the Red Army on Its Arrival at the Gates of Prussia: “I wanted to sing for you all, for the whole of the earth, this song of obscure words, to make us worthy of the light that is coming.” This expedition, as one can perceive will lead us from the homes of each of the three authors towards other cultural

areas and to a whole, unified universe.

Let me say in passing that Neruda, an ardent lover of Tagore's poetry surreptitiously took two poems from Tagore and paraphrased them without any acknowledgement and added it in his book of poetry "Twenty poems of love and a song of despair" which sold more than a million copies and made him world famous. When it was revealed, he faced severe criticism, and only after his friend Joaquin Cifuentes Sepveda advised him that he should add an explanation in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition and that what he did. The title of the poem is "In My Sky at Twilight" with the explanation that

This poem is a paraphrase of the 30th poem "*Tumi sandhar megha mala*" in Rabindranath Tagore's "The Gardener".

"In my sky at twilight you are like a cloud and your form and color are the way I love them. You are mine, mine, woman with sweet lips and in your life my infinite dreams live" and in this way the poem goes on.

The Tagorean influence on Neruda can also be seen in the song "*Jodi tor daak shune keu naa ashe ekla cholo re*"

which loosely means “If no one answers your call...walk alone.” Tagore writes on to say how this person whose call no one has heeded should even walk on the thorns for his conviction, lighting his ribs (or renouncing everything) for illumination on the way. Perhaps if the person was ever asked as to how it felt during the lonely journey the answer might just have been this poem of Neruda titled:

"Come With Me, I Said, and No One Knew"

“Come with me, I said, and no one knew  
Where, or how my pain throbbed,  
No carnations or barcaroles for me,  
Only a wound love had opened” and it continues like this.

Another point raised by Kaushik in his video is Gitanjali of Tagore, the slim book of poems which won him the noble prize and this is the centenary year of the award. Let me first inform that English Gitanjali is not an English translation of Gitanjali but a different book titled ‘Song Offerings’ which contains poems of Tagore in translation from ten of his books of poetry including a song from one of his plays. Secondly, Tagore was the first non-European to receive the award that invested the award with a special significance and made it look almost like a unique

phenomenon. Tagore translated all these poems in a small exercise book and carried it with him to London and there a minor mishap happened as recalled by his son, which might have changed the whole course of events. The son was carrying his father's brief-case, which contained among other papers the manuscript of the English 'Song Offerings'. While travelling in the Underground from Charing Cross to Russel Square, he left behind the brief-case in the compartment and realized the mistake on the following morning when Tagore asked for it. Fortunately the brief-case was recovered at the lost property office.

Sir William Rothenstein, a distinguished painter and art historian who was friend to artist brothers Abanindranath and Gaganendranath, and who visited Tagore's ancestral house at Jorashanko in Calcutta in 1910, arranged a reading on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2012 at his Hampstead House where W.B.Yeats read out the poems in 'his musical ecstatic voice to a choicest gathering which included Ezra Pound, May Sinclair, Charles Trevelyan and others and also Charles Freer Andrews, who later became Tagore's lifelong friend. That night Andrews remained out under the sky far into the night almost till dawn was breaking intoxicated by the haunting melody of the English so

simple, pure and undiluted. Yeats wrote that these lyrics displayed in their thought a world he has dreamed of all his life long. Ezra Pound found in these lyrics suddenly the new Greece, curious quite and the stillness of nature.

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.”

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.

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, 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.’ This ‘other modernity’ of Tagore is an unique phenomenon of his thinking and creative process.

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 ‘ratio vitalism’ 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.’

In the video we heard the recitation of a poem ‘The Awakening of the Waterfall’, *Nirjharer Svapna bhanga* published in 1883 which had a special meaning in Tagore’s life. Tagore says, I am a born romantic and his romanticism is in fact a search for the self in nature or the identification of the self with the supreme reality whereas the western romanticism is the establishment of individualism where nature is a source of reference to define one’s own identity and for Indian romantics self is always accepted as self-referential, where nature or the supreme reality is identified with the self.

But there is an important difference between Tagore and the major moderns of Europe – James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Stravinsky, Picasso – all have built on romanticism but at the same time tried to break away from it – break away from established rules, traditions and conventions and imply fresh ways of looking at man’s position and function in the universe. Subsequent generations of artists have cut their links with romanticism completely.

Tagore, however, carried his romanticism intact into the modern world, used it as a scepter and a torch. As a result in 1883 in *Prabhat Sangeet* Tagore could turn his romantic sensibility into a call for freedom and revolt in the words “*bhang, bhang, bhang kara*’ (break, break, break the prison). Later in the words of *Sonar Tari* (Golden Boat, 1894), Tagore says “*niruddeshye yatra kothaye aamake niye jabe re swapan sundari?*”- “where will this journey to an unknown destination take me – oh beautiful dream?” The journey has to have an unknown destination because far and wide the end of the colonial domination was not in sight. This is the period when the Tagore’s romanticism becomes directly political reflecting the aspirations of a colonial people; hence the mood of revolt

and the feeling of patriotism gained predominance, which became an all-India phenomenon during the non-cooperation movement led by Mahatma Gandhi.

Nikhil's video also refers to Tagore's sister-in-law Kadambari Devi. During the 1870s, a highly affectionate, teasing, somewhat childish relationship grew up between his sister-in-law, kadambari Devi and Rabi, the budding poet and it became deeper after the death of Tagore's mother, Sharada Devi in 1875. Rabi named Kadambari, Hecate, after the Greek goddess associated with night, and dedicated a number of poems and books of poems to her. There is no doubt that Kadambari had the deepest female impact on the youthful Tagore. Kadambari's contribution in moulding Rabindranath's mind was incalculable. ChitraDev 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 but which one is true is very difficult to predict. There was no report in the newspapers except that in the family account book there was an entry: ‘Expenses towards suppressing the news of the death to the press Rs 52.’

Tagore would always say 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:

*Nayanosamukhetuminai*

*Nayaneromajkhaneniyechho je thnai*

‘You are no longer before my eyes

You have taken up abode in the midst of my eyes.’

It was Kadambari’s image that impelled Tagore to describe a woman as half human and half imagination— a romantic dreamgirl.

In the course of time Tagore developed deep love for his wife, whom he called ‘chhotobau’(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.’

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 triumphed so beautifully: *amrita se-mritu hote daao tumi ani*. Death! Oh, it is nectar, bring it to me. This declaration almost resembles a proclamation from the Vedas: *Yasya chaya amritam yasya mritu*, in His shadow one finds nectar and also death.

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 Korezak, 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. Such was the appeal of the play and its insightful depth of meaning that when Korezak was asked that why did he select this play he said that I wanted to convey to these 200 orphan children as how to accept the angel of death in peace.

Tagore's experience with death and his notion of death as the outcome of his experience with death is already explained by me. Here I want to fortify my thesis with a poem by Tagore "*Aaguner parsomani*": *Agun* is fire and *parsomani*, the *paras patther* or philosopher's stone. Fire, standing for all the trials and tribulations of suffering, bereavement, humiliation, disease, ageing – '*duhkha*' as Buddha would have called it – and Tagore's life started with loss of mother, favourite sister-in-law, father, son, daughter, wife, on and on was full of this fire (full of) burns. People take it as devastation, burning to ashes. Rabindranath – not just in this song but in many many many songs and poems – expresses his '*anubhav*' that the Fire turns transforms the 'iron in the

soul' to Gold. And hence Tagore by mixing up metaphors speaks of '*aguner sparshamani*'. Instead of burning down life, may the Fire of extreme suffering touch my life like a *sparshamani* and make it *punya*, sacred, holy. By the gift of burning *dohan daaney* make it sacred.

Insinuation of Raja Rammohan Roy by Gandhi created quite a stir during that era. Raja Rammohan Roy came to England in 1831 as the ambassador of the Mughal Emperor Akbar Shah II died in 1833 in Bristol and was initially buried in the grounds of Beech House, but ten years later his friend Dwarakanath Tagore, grandfather of Tagore, had him reinterred at Arno's Vale. A chattri (funerary monument or shrine) was designed by William Prinsep and built with sponsorship from Dwarakanath Tagore was placed over the tomb. In 1997 a full size statue of Raja Ram Mohan Roy was also built at Bristol. The insinuation by Gandhi by calling Raja as a pygmy for thinking and writing in English disturbed Tagore quite a bit 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."

Tagore was afraid of a self-destroying isolationism which Gandhi was trying to set in by his notion of cultural nationalism and said that in setting India above also sets it apart from the rest of the world. 'Today, at this critical moment of the world's history, cannot India rise above her limitations and offer the great ideal to the world that will work towards harmony in cooperation between the different people of the earth?... The idea of India is against

the intense consciousness of the separateness of one's own people from others, and which inevitably leads to ceaseless conflicts.... Let us be rid of all false pride and rejoice at any lamp being lit at any corner of the world, knowing that it is a part of the common illumination of our house....'

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.'

These lines are engraved in school and college buildings across the land. Emblematic of a certain (and now threatened) strand of Indian nationalism, they have recently acquired a fresh lease of life outside this country. Thus, Gandhi's words have been cited in the debates on curriculum reform in the divided campuses of the elite American universities. They are, says Ramachandra Guha, indeed, an argument-clinching *mantra* for our multicultural times.

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."

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 7<sup>th</sup> 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 is to reduce the Gandhi-Tagore debate, which according to Nehru were the great debates of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 means very little and I know Mahatmaji carries that greatness with him.’

There were no debates to prove one's superiority but 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 very deeply, Once Gandhi requested Tagore to spin the charkha, Tagore immediately responded, you write a poem, I shall spin the wheel.

This Video on Tagore by Nikhil speaks of Tagore's last foreign visit to England to deliver the Hibbert lectures at Oxford. At Oxford delivered the Hibbert Lectures on 19, 21 and 26 May 1930 later published as 'The Religion of Man'. Before a record audience he delivered his concluding lecture at the Chapel of Manchester College. After the lecture the Principle of the college, L. P. Jacks observed, 'We shall never forget in Oxford the gift you have given us and the inspiration you have brought to us.'

But this was not his last foreign tour. Just as he had come to the regretful conclusion that he would no longer be able to undertake another foreign tour, there came an invitation from the king of Iran, Reza Shah Pehlavi, to visit his country. Tagore noted in his diary that it would hardly do to refuse an invitation from the august head of a neighbouring and friendly nation. And so left for Persia by the Dutch Air Mail

Service to avoid any unnecessary strain on 11 April 1932. This was his 2<sup>nd</sup> experience of travel by air, the earlier one having been a short hop first from London to Paris.

I will mention just one incident of his visit to Iraq and Iran. He was taken by the Governor for a visit to the tomb of the most distinguished poet of Persia, Siraz, where the Governor worked an oracle by asking the poet to formulate a question in his mind. Opening the Diwan (book of poetry) of Hafiz at random the poem of the top was supposed to be the prophecy, “May the doors of the tavern be opened. We open it in the name of God.” The poet’s question was whether the communal strife in India will ever end. The keyword was ‘open’ signifying progress and fulfillment. My point is even during that grand ceremony of pomp and show Tagore’s mind was still so absorbed with the issue of communal strife which was raging during that time in India.

Instead of talking about the total man or a particular issue related with Tagore’s ideas and thoughts, I picked up some snippets and reflections from his life and his debates with Gandhi; and now I leave it to you, my distinguished audience, to break and compound these oddments and create your own Tagore and Gandhi.