

## **Tagore as a Transnational writer**

When AnanyaVajpeyi in her book 'Righteous Republic' says that 'how monumental an error of judgment occurred in designating Tagore as India or Bengal's national poet can be judged from the fact that both India in 1947 and Bangladesh in 1971 adopted two of his songs as their respective national anthems. These gestures consolidated the misreading of Tagore as a poet of nationhood when he was in fact anything but that'. It sounds apparently true but it is also misleading at the same time. He was a transnational poet, no doubt but he was a nationalist with a difference at the same time and always, as says William Radice, near to his people.

He himself, no doubt, once said, 'I am a poet of the world, 'I try to capture its melody, wherever it rises' (aikatan, harmony) but this melody emanated from the soil and spread in far distant horizon.

Transnational means that one who is beyond one's nation and not affiliated with particularity of only one's tradition, culture, society or ethos and ready to be a part of the world at large and having a universal vision of life.

Tagore was no doubt a strong critic of nationalism and the concept of nation -state. 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 went for universal humanism and cosmopolitanism but not as an enlightenment project or homogenized universalism.

Universal humanism, trans national, cosmopolitanism or glovalism are expressions apparently look like having only shades of difference in meaning and that they are all used for Tagore and even sometimes interchangeably by scholars like Martha Nussbaum.

But in reality there is quite a difference at least between transnational and cosmopolitan and universal humanism.

When we look at Tagore as a transnational we actually find him turning it into a notion of transnationalization of nation state. It is Tagore's universal nationalism which is an inclusive plural concept of a nation which goes beyond the idea of exclusive nationalism and where the whole earth is a family. Tagore was for 'non-parochial inclusive nationalism' relevant to humanity.

To speak of cosmopolitanism with reference to Tagore is to refer to a transformation

in self-understanding as a result of the engagement with others over issues of global morality and ethics. But for Tagore this self-transformation allows him to realize the other as self- same.

While discussing the issue of the self and other, Levinassays, '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 Jacque Derrida 'the foundation of ethics is hospitality, the readiness and inclination to welcome the other into one's home.' Levinas and Derrida's theories of ethics – responsibility and hospitality – no doubt reveal a new consciousness emerging in the West about crossing the boundaries and looking beyond one's nation but it is still a broad view of particularism. It holds out the possibility of

acceptance of the other as different but of equal standing. This is no where nearer to the Upanishadic idea of oneness, as referred to by Tagore in his acceptance speech of the Nobel Prize delivered on 26<sup>th</sup> June, 1921 at Stockholm:

“One who perceives all the beings in his own self and own self in all the beings does not hate any one anymore.”

(Yastu Sarvanibhutaniamanyevanupashyati, Sarvabhuteshuchatma namtatonavijugupsate.)

Universal humanism is almost the same as cosmopolitanism except that it does not talk only of identity of the self with the other

but at the same time it is meant for Tagore a little more and also different from others because of his notion of the unity of inspiration of the self with the Infinite as he said:

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

The word cosmopolitanism as we perceive relates to the discursive level of knowledge and communication. Universalism as Tagore explains it transcends this discursive level and includes the spiritual aspect of being as well and hence he says in his essay on ‘Nationalism in the West’:

“Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship is the goal of human history. And India has been trying to accomplish her task through social regulation of differences, on the one hand, and the spiritual recognition of unity, on the other.”

I argue that though the meanings of these above terms are unequivocal but at the same time the innumerable interpretive ambiguities of these terms undergird Tagore's life and vision and that form the foundation of his open-ended all embracing philosophy of universal humanism.

His optimism of some spiritual emancipative power coming to save the humanity is also vividly spelt out at the end of his last lecture, 'The Crisis in Civilization' delivered at the age of 80 :

"Today I live in the hope that the saviour is coming that he will be born in our midst in this poverty shamed hovel which is India. I shall wait to hear the divine message of civilization which he will bring with him, the supreme word of promise that he will speak unto man from this very eastern horizon to give faith and strength to all who hear." (Crisis in Civilization)

Another man before his death in 1940, a German, Walter Benjamin, said also almost the same thing:

"For every second of time was the straight gate through which the Messiah might enter." (Theses on the Philosophy of History)

Both of them are not talking about their countries but of the whole world, of the whole humanity. Both Tagore and Benjamin were not talking about the superiority of the spiritual domain over the material domain but were trying to find a way out for the redemption of the total humanity and developing a discourse of

universal humanism. This should not be equated in any way with the German Sonderweg discourse. It is the normal path and not any unique German or age-old spiritual Indian path where spiritual exceptionalism does not exclude universalism but cohabits with that. Both the exceptionalist and universalist discourses are the head and tail of the same coin and it is, indeed, to Tagore's everlasting credit that his great cosmopolitan vision never sacrificed the richest possible sense of tradition.

The cosmopolitan attitude here is not derived from a conception of reason that universality always tends toward abstractions; rather, it is dependent upon reason's articulation of the universal through an engagement with the local.

'When we understand this truth in a disinterested spirit, it teaches us to respect all the differences in man that are real, yet remain conscious of our oneness (Tagore, Creative Unity).

It is this solution— unity through acknowledgement of differences— that India has to offer to the world' (Tagore, Nationalism). This conception is the principal element of Tagore's idea of cosmopolitan universality or universal humanism.

For Tagore it was easy to hint at the transnationality of the nationalist imagination, accept cosmopolitanism and making tradition as a part of it as he says,

"I have come to feel that the mind, which has been matured in the atmosphere of a profound knowledge of its own country and of the perfect thoughts that have been produced in that land, is

ready to accept and assimilate the cultures that come from other countries' ('The Way to Unity').

Otherwise also in the assertion of Marc Bloch that 'all history is comparative history' hints at the transnationality of the nationalist imagination, for comparative history throws lights on the peculiarities of a given national history and, thus helps to understand 'the national' within the broad frame work of international discourse. National history itself is a product of worldwide cultural interactions and transnational discourses. It would thus be more appropriate to keep in mind the configuration of national and transnational history; it is in this transnational space that one can figure out the strategic location of the historiographical exceptionalism or in Tagore words tradition or local.

Tagore has called himself a wayfarer; he loved to visit distant lands and his correspondence reveals his contacts through his travels around the world and his deep engagement with the global course of history.

His faith in humanity encouraged him to speak against injustice, violence and narrow view of nationalist exceptionalism and crime against humanity. He wrote against the fascist regime of Mussolini in *Manchester Guardian* which ruthlessly suppressed the freedom of expression; against the cannibalistic political culture of Nazism that shook his 'faith in modern civilization' particularly when his friend Albert Einstein was removed from his academic position in Berlin in 1932 and ultimately had to leave Germany. He renounced knighthood at the age of 58 after the Jalianwala

Bagh massacre where 379 unarmed people were killed and 1,137 injured at the behest of British General Dyer. He also expressed his sentiments against the war mongering Japan whose military authorities were bent upon devastating China. But the most pathetic incident for him was the appeasement of Nazi Germany at Munich treaty in September 20, 1938 by the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, who was one of the signatories of the treaty along with Edouard Daladier, the then Prime Minister of France and sent

a message to President Edvard Beneš of Czechoslovakia expressing his deepest sympathy on behalf of India. A week later he wrote

his famous poem:

Those crushed and trodden lives of the meek and the weak  
/which are sacrificed as food  
offerings for the mighties...

We will not fear, overcoming the distress, victory for  
us at the end(Prayaschita)

When he sent a message to American President Franklin D Roosevelt on 15<sup>th</sup> June, 1940 stating that 'all our individual problems of politics today have merged into one supreme world politics', it was Tagore's all time realization that 'the ideal of universalism is inseparable from the domain of global politics where it needs to be worked out in real time'.

This global voyage into the foreign which also nurtured his ideals of universalism encouraged Tagore to talk in 1906 of 'Vishva Sahitya' world literature as a synonymic term for comparative

literature. The term was first coined by Goethe in 1827 though Goethe hinted in his journal *Propoeylen* about the use of the term by Christophe Martin Wieland some 13 years ago and presented his thesis that “ There is no such thing as patriotic art or patriotic science... Both belong to world literature”.

There is no doubt that in the age of transnationalism and globalization Goethe’s concept cannot be ignored but it was against national literature and was based on insulating identities—one region, one religion, one race, one language and one literature. He said, “I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men. . . . I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach. (Eckermann: Johann Peter *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*, trans. John Oxenford as J. W. von Goethe, *Conversations with Eckermann*, repr. North Point Press, p.132, 1994).

But where is this one, one world? It is already divided by the West into three – 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> world and hence Franko Moretti, and Pascale Casanova, stressed the inequalities of the global literary field, which Moretti described as ‘one, but unequal.’ In Tagore’s term *Vishva Sahitya*, the adjective *vishva* is not world, but the total universe. In this case, *vishva* is something that is spread all over; something is extended first and then it spreads.

It does not have geographical or regional territories, and is not limited by the boundaries of countries and continents or even by the earth. It is not a binary term as opposed to nation but holistic as a concept broader, dynamic, and more catholic and inclusive.

*Vishva Sahitya* is based primarily on his concept of *Vishwamanava*, the universal man. To him universal humanity expressed itself in literature. Let me summarize what Tagore says:

In his Address, he discussed the concept of world literature in terms of universal man. Tagore envisaged *Vishwa Sahitya* as a *mandir* (temple) which is a construct but not an ordinary one. The temples have their master plan but it has no visible master plan. It should, however, not be construed that it does not have its master-builders. In this temple each writer is an artisan and a worker contributing according to one's natural capacities to the whole. Whatever does not stand the test of time falls off on its own. The workers are no ordinary mortals, they are the universal men and they are not paid in terms of wages but become recipients of prestige accorded to an *ustad* (master).

'To judge literature by this model is to draw on the support of humankind's collective wisdom.'

In Tagore's concept the most important factor is recognition of inter-relatedness of all human beings, their faculties and their relations with all elements in the universe and everything that is there. All faculties of human inner being exist to forge a

relationship with all.

The bond of joy is 'in knowing others as our own'. (Tagore 139) Moreover, he saw inter-relatedness, as he began with the metaphor from the world of dance, in which birth and death, deliverance and bondage, beauty and ugliness, pain and joy are conjoined and all dance together in ecstasy. In the complementarity of the opposite Tagore finds the meaning and joy of life. The dance relates to *natraj* as the highest point of reference who with his one step destroys and with another step creates.

Tagore refers to Lord Krishna, Mathurapati or the king of Mathura, dancing with the milkmaids of Vrindavan. This bond of joy 'erases all distances' (Tagore 139) because there is no self-conceit, or concealment or calculation. Rather there is surrender of ourselves to the small and weak.

In Bangla storytelling formula, says Nabaneeta Dev Sen, a tale begins, *Ek je chhilo raja*, ("There was a king"). In one of his last pieces written in 1941, just before his death, he begins his tale with this formulaic expression *Ek je achhemanush* ("There is a man"). He makes two enormously important changes in the formula, he changes its tense from the past to the present, and changes its subject from a king to a common man. Instead of "*there was*" he writes "*there is*", and instead of "*a king*" he writes "*a man*", meaning a *human being*.

These were the alternatives he offered to mankind, to grapple with the crisis our civilization had created for itself, and the world was passing through in 1941. The focus was to be shifted from the past to the present, not the present moment but the

continuous presence, *bartaman*, indicating the eternal presence of mankind upon this planet and ascertain a shift from the royalty to the common man, from the source of political power to the source of moral strength, and from colonialism to democracy and from exclusive nationalism to transnationalism – a recognition of inter-relatedness of all human beings and with all elements in the universe and everything that is there.