

Paintings of Tagore and his notion of Art

In 1915 itself in his introduction to his play *Chitra*, an English version of his Bengali play *Chitrangada*, Tagore said that people thought of him as an idealist talking only of the hopes and aspirations of the people and painting a rosy picture of life, This was not true. He felt concerned about the sufferings of the humanity. That was a continuous concern which made him create a world of the eerie and the bizarre, the distorted and the dark in his paintings as well as in his poetry. The strain is more strongly marked in his latter period.

It all happened after 1924-25 at the time of 63 and 64 years of age, after the formal inauguration of *Visva-Bharati*. Tagore left for an academic tour of China and Japan and then South America. On his way to South America he fell critically ill. He had to keep himself inside the cabin all the time. The boat crossed over the equatorial line. The crossing was very rough and his mind was distraught with the saddest thoughts of the tragedy of love and death. It was in this mood that he strove to pass the painfully dragging hours in his cabin writing poetry. These were the poems of *Purabi* with their calligraphic erasures about which he wrote:

“When the scratches in my manuscript cried, like sinners for salvation and assailed my eyes with the ugliness of irrelevance, I often took more time in rescuing them into a merciful finality of rhythm than in carrying on what was my obvious task.”(1)

And explaining the reason why he did so, he wrote,

“The only training which I had from my young days was the training in rhythm, rhythm in thought, and rhythm in sound. I have come to know that rhythm gives reality to that which is desultory.”(2)

In fact, while making corrections he scored out some words or erring lines and then he found that scratches looking very ugly. (3) He was also not systematic in his writing. The *Purabi* poems reveal a degree of desultoriness induced probably by the state of his mind and health during the crossing. He gave some kind of a form to these scratches which turned into figures. His mind was very much disturbed in face of the violent crisis in the world, caused by the unchecked terrors of fascism, and he found himself evoking the primitivist world of crawling snakes, sharp beaked birds, globules of rough faces, square –jawed humans and heavy brooding ghostly forms, bursting flowers.

Shri Sovon Sen while giving a very authentic and matter of fact explanation of the genesis and development of his world of paintings, said that in order to give a cosmetic treatment to the erring lines and corrections that defaced the manuscript ‘like a maze of deserted trenches in a self-ravaged battlefield’, he took more time in covering them with linear tracteries than in writing. He was more concerned to counter the ugliness then these erasures caused. These cross-outs tracked through the horizontally composed writings, creating a unique flowing design. As Tagore conjoined stray deletions with extended lines, the coverings attained a unity of design as well. These were neither sought after nor were some pre-planned designs; on the contrary, the tip of his pen found them on its journey to

a fulfilment. In his case, it was not the brush that created the design, but it was the same tip of the fountain pen that wrote poetry which found the seeds of the visual form and paved his way to the domain of painting. He contoured the erring lines with thin with thin pen marks adding cartouches and orgees as design elements and filled up the deletion with playful hatchings and delicate curves. (4). There must have been a distinct style and depth in Tagore's paintings which must have induced W.G. Archer, an acknowledged art critic, to remark that he is the first modern painter that India has produced.

From the area of silence thus emerged a world which shows men and women as they really affected the artist in their true reality as demons, humans or angels. But think of Tagore who after his first visit to Japan in 1916, severely criticising Japan's imperialist policy towards China in his two lectures, 'The Nation' and 'The spirit of Japan' which roused considerable resentment, wrote to his two artist nephews from Japan:

To Aban,

The more I travel in Japan the more I feel that you should have been here too. How vital it is to get into close contact with the living art of this country in order to infuse life into our own art – this you will never realize squatting there all the time in your South verandah. Our country has no artistic atmosphere, there is no arterial link between our social life and our art – for us art is a superficial thing, neither here nor there; which is why you people can never derive your

full nourishment from indigenous sources. (5) If you come here, you would see how the Japanese race lives in the lap of art- every aspect of its life is artistic. Had you come, the scales would have fallen from your eyes, and the goddess of art in your innermost being would have received her proper homage. (6)

But on one hand, he praised the traditional Japanese art and its aesthetic beauty, and on the other when it came to painting he created a primitivist world and what he wrote about his own art could be summarised as follows:

- 1) He was an expressionist, urging to revert to primitive sources of inspiration in order that the imaginative creativity might be renewed and the hateful routine of cut-and-dried realism abandoned.
- 2) His lines often expressed passions that were abstract and evolved characters that drew upon subtle suggestions.
- 3) The perfect representation of an object, say a horse, by an academician can fail to move us, yet one of his weird creatures could be very compelling. He illustrates this with a story: “A child comes to me and commands me to tell her a story. I tell her of a tiger which is disgusted by the black stripes on its body and comes to my frightened servant demanding a piece of soap. The story gives my little audience immense pleasure, the pleasure of a vision.”
- 4) Tagore did not have any academic training, but he bypassed known techniques and relied on pure artistic instinct. It is the element of unpredictability in art that

fascinated him, and the resultant effect of that that his pictures do not represent a scheme preconceived in his mind. It is often said that he entered into the domain of art almost in a somnambulistic way.

5) Tagore shared a common trait with Paul Valery, Nikolai Gogol, W. M. Thackeray, Vladimir Mayakovsky, William Blake and that was that their painting and writings supplemented each other. They continued their writings in paintings and vice-versa.

(7) K G Subramanyan, in a more positive sense attempted at initiating a process of *de-exceptionalising* Tagore's painting from his "author-function" by trying to associate it with the

nature of the poet's thoughts and deeds in other domains of his activity. (8)

6) Tagore pursued a kind of 'automatic' writing by allowing his painting tools to move about on the surface of canvas in a diagrammatical manner, presumably without any prefixed idea, so that the painting tools would find images of their own.

7) Artists in a natural consequence shift from figuration to abstraction, in Tagore case it happened the other way round. After returning from Argentina, Tagore started creating rhythmic forms in black on white paper and thus moved from abstraction to figuration.

8) Tagore did not name his paintings. Ramananda Chattopadhyay, the legendary editor of a Bengali monthly journal, wrote a letter to Tagore requesting him to name the paintings selected by him for printing

in *Prabasi*. Tagore wrote to him that “it is absolutely impossible to give a name to my pictures, the reason being that I never make a picture of any preconceived subject. Accidentally some form, whose genealogy I am totally unaware of, takes shape out of the tip of my moving pen and stand out as an individual. It is like Sita coming out of the furrows made by King Janaka’s ploughshare. For him it was easier to give a name to that one accidental factor — the more so when the name had no relation to the actual subject matter. For me. It is hopeless to try to register the names of the progeny of my pen who come unhidden and in such numbers. I do realise one does not feel happy as long as *rupa* (form) is not given a *nama* (name). (9) Incidentally Tagore was the first Indian artist who abstained from naming his visual work.

Tagore called his paintings doodles and his Argentinean hostess Victoria Ocampo took them seriously and requested him to commence painting pictures for their own sake. She arranged the first exhibition of his paintings of 1924 and then 25, 26, 27 and 28 at Paris in 1930 and thereafter in England, Germany, Denmark, Russia and America.

By 1940 Tagore created 2000 drawings and paintings. Tagore also wrote about the process of his paintings:

- 1) First there is the hint of a line;
- 2) Then the line takes a form;
- 3) The more pronounced the form, the clearer the picture of his conception and

- 4) This creation of form is an endless wonder.
 Tagore has said in a poem
 “Fragments of forms stored in the mind
 Combines in pictures on the magic touch of art.”
 Yet in another place he has observed:
 “A strange face uninvited
 Hovers before my brush
 Making me wonder
 Whence does it appear” (10)

His subjects are:

- a. Natural scenery, e.g. flowers, creepers, trees etc.;
- b. Human images;
- c. Animals and queer objects.

Western connoisseurs have discovered affinities of style and theme between the works of Tagore and those of Modigliani, Pollaiuolo, Munch, Nolde, Paul Klee, Morgenstern, Kubin, Franz Mare and a host of moderns. But a statement by Henri Bidou , previewing Tagore’s visual work prior to the exhibition in Paris in 1930, very straightforwardly established the fact that Tagore was not at all influenced by the West:

“These forms begin by having an abstract character. Little by little, whether by kind of self-produced evolution, or because the influence which guides them is touched by some memory of the common world, they acquire a certain resemblance to what we call nature....Only those who have never recognised the mysterious currents of thought and feeling , the outcome of the age itself, which penetrate all souls as by osmosis, and give direction to a whole epoch, will be surprised

that these pure paintings, absolutely sincere and wholly uninfluenced by our studio customs, should resemble now and then the most recent researches of the painters of the West. There can be no question of imitation, but the convergence of the spirit is remarkable.” (11)

One can conclude that

- 1) In his pictures one finds a staccato rhythm of our puzzled times. They bring out the stress and strain, conflict and confusion of a civilization crumbling into a vast ruin;
- 2) There are also luminous landscapes symbolizing the hope of a dawn arising out of the East;
- 3) He created a new language of purely visual expression, because he felt the spoken language did not convey everything.

As in paintings, so in his poems written in the later stage of his life, Tagore finds himself in a state of utter despair. He describes this feeling in one of his poems:

I see secretive hatred murdering the
 helpless under cover of night
 And justice weeping silently and
 Furtively at power misused,
 No hope of redress.
 I see young men working themselves
 into a frenzy
 In agony dashing their hands against
 stone to no avail.
 My voice is choked today;

I have no music in my flute;
 Black moonless night
 Has imprisoned my world, plunged it
 into nightmare
 And this is why with tears in my eyes, I ask:
 Those who have poisoned your air,
 Those who have extinguished your light,
 Can it be that you have forgiven them?
 Can it be that you love them? (12)

These are questions which he goes on asking again and again and for many of them he fails to find an answer, but this does not deter him from seeking the truth. He describes the inevitability of suffering and death, nevertheless, he talks of the power to endure them – power which presents man in a new glory. In his last stirring lecture, ‘Crisis in Civilization’ at the age of 80, a few months before his death, he spoke in the same vein and I quote, ‘A day will come when unvanquished Man will retrace his path of conquest, despite all barriers, to win back his lost human heritage.’ (13)

But the problem starts when persons like Prithwish Neogy, a well known Harvard- educated art historian, who acted as a curator of Rabindra Sadan in Visva-Bharati wrote in Sahitya Akademi Tagore Centenary Volume, though in a difficult style and English that

“As though impelled by his intimations of the revelatory transposition of perceptive faculties in art, the aging poet’s runaway experience of painting had powerfully aided in

setting comparatively free the conclusive phase of his literature from lingering aristocratic, formal and traditional compunctions and the inhibition of the last century. Rabindranath Tagore had come to belong fully to the world of his time, the modern world.” (14)

When Neogy said, modern world, he meant the Western world where modernity developed because of the impact of Enlightenment. In Western terminology, modernism is a breaking away from established rules, traditions and conventions, and implies fresh ways of looking at man’s position and functions in the universe, and inheres in some cases remarkable experiments in form and style. In 1784, Immanuel Kant, in a short essay, ‘Enlightenment’, speaking in the same vein, was talking about the way the present was drawn out the meaning of enlightenment, or the definition of modernism but Tagore, right from the very beginning, rejected the Western modernism and declared in Beijing in 1924 that the impertinence of material things is extremely old. The revelation of spirit in man is truly modern: I am on its side, for I am modern (15). He said all this while in the same academic tour of China, Japan, and South America when in a state of ill health he painted while travelling by boat the bizarre, the distorted and the dark, the eerie and the primitivist and continued to do so in the coming years. In fact before that in his visit to Japan in 1916 he had already stated that true modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste. It is independence of thought and action, not tutelage under European school –masters. (16)

When Tagore said that modernity is freedom of mind and not slavery of taste he was actually hinting at a critical openness that allows one to retrieve, rediscover and redefine elements of culture in a creative way, by a return of pride in one's roots, while looking ahead and hence when in the modern times Tagore could still write:

Thou hast made me endless
Such is Thy pleasure (*Gitanjali*)

Yeats could not but talk of a particular historical strain in the western modernist movement:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.

Tagore's poem speaks of the spiritual bond between the self and the universal self and rejects any kind of narrow approach related to humanity.

Yeats' line of the poem reveals that Europe with all its materialist advancement and prosperity seemed to be haunted by a TS Eliot – Wasteland feeling of inner desolation so prominent in her poetry and art - What Heidegger was to call the feeling of homelessness?

Tagore had the courage to speak of other modernism and even create a world of paintings as a creation of a mind which was very disturbed because of the tragic crisis in the world and unchecked terrors of fascism and saddest thoughts of the tragedy of love and death. But for Tagore, who believed in the

creative unity, of harmony of life, to talk all of a sudden of disharmony and dissonance in his paintings can encourage any body to find the influence of the West in it and place him in the modern world of his time. Tagore's views on these subjects may look contradictory but at the same time under a school of *bhedabhed* of Indian philosophy contradictions are complementary to each other, which is an age old philosophical concept of India and China known as 'complementariness of the opposites' and hence for Tagore it was easy to hint at the harmony and dissonance in his art creation.(17) In fact in a famous song of Tagore he showed how the opposites- death and birth dance together, beauty and ugly complement each other and joy and sorrow together make the life a complete whole.

Indian mind believed in double time order, one, is the level of reality which has a time marker, so it has a linear tension. The other is the level of man's hopes and aspirations – the world of gods having a cyclical rhythm. The double time-order reveals the basic nature of Indian art which knows no anti-thesis between the immediate and the ultimate, the earthly and the heavenly, the sensuous and the transcendental, enjoyment and liberation, harmony and dissonance and accepts them as complementary to each other. Tagore conceived of these orders in unison. Tagore says in his *Atmaparichaya* , I am the messenger of Vichitra, the variegated or the Universal Soul. This Universal Soul manifests itself into *bahu*, multiforms so that he may go on playing his divine game in playful tune, songs, dance,

painting, words and other forms. (18) In his poem, *samanjasya*, he reveals that

*The Infinite wants the finite's intimate comradeship
And the finite wishes to lose itself in the Infinite.*

The true principle of art, Tagore says, is the principle of unity between the Infinite and the finite. (19) But the Infinite is not impersonal. In all creative activity, Tagore says, reflects directly or indirectly, man's lavish desire for the manifestation of Person. The communication of a person to a person is the creative act but sometimes person's ego hinders the contact with the Universal Self. Egoism is the biggest thief of the world. (20) The egocentric individualism conflicts with the concept of unity. Tagore relates an excellent incident about this:

Tagore often used to go on his small house boat and live for months on the beautiful river, surrounded by thick forest, in absolute silence and aloneness.

One full-moon night, it happened that he was reading a very significant contribution to the philosophy of aesthetics, by Croce. In the middle of night, tired from Croce's very complicated arguments, he closed the book and blew out the candle. He was going to his bed to sleep, but a miracle happened.

As the small flame of the candle disappeared, from every window and door of the small house boat the moon came dancing in. The moon filled the house with its splendour. Rabindra Nath Tagore remained silent for a moment. It was

such a sacred experience. He went out of the house, and the moon was immensely beautiful in that silent night amongst those silent trees, with a river flowing so slowly that there was no noise.

He wrote in his diary the next morning, the beauty was all around me, but a small candle had been preventing the whole universe from rushing into me. Because of the light of the candle, the light of the moon could not enter and hence the first step towards creative act is to blow out the candle in other words, to replace the egocentric individual with the living growing personality. The ideal of harmony is fully consistent with recognition of the value of personality in aesthetic creativity and then only the whole universe penetrates you from every nook and corner.

Tagore, while explaining the creative act, has said about *viupa-bhedah*, separateness of forms. He says that in sheer oneness, form can have only a potential existence but the varied forms if they remain separate only, there would be fearful loneliness of multitude. Hence the varied forms, in their very separateness, must carry something which indicates the paradox of their ultimate unity. Otherwise there would be no creation and for that Tagore refers to the term *pramaanaani*, proportion which indicate relationship, the principal of mutual accommodation and the harmony of the fact. But beauty cannot be always proportionate or symmetrical. One may discover symmetry in a lotus or in the structure of the Taj Mahal but the deep, dark forest, the starlit shadowy pathway in the silent night, the many splendoured

aspects of human life as depicted in the Mahabharata or the shabbily dressed, pulled down languishing Shakuntala wearing a single plait cannot possibly be branded as 'symmetrical'.(21) More than outer proportion these examples reflect an inner harmony of *bhava* which inspires the artist and evokes the spectator to wonder and enjoy.

Thing which is abundant, left-over, surplus, which overlaps one's absolute need, in that resides the Divine. There is a remarkable verse in the Atharva Veda which attributes all that is great in the human world to superfluity. It says :

*Ritam satyam taporashtram sramo dharmascha-karmaschal
Bhutam bhavishyat uchisthe viryam lokashmeer balambale*

“Righteousness, Truth, great endeavours, empire, religion, enterprise, heroism and prosperity, the past and the future dwell in the surpassing strength of the surplus.” The meaning of it is that man expresses himself through his superabundance which largely overlaps his absolute needs. Tagore says, “In superfluity or transcendence, we have the genesis of creation and therefore the origin of art”. Here Tagore talks about the artist who goes beyond one's needs, one's desires, one's worldliness and turns into a creative artist without any ego, a no-mind, only then one realises the Divine, the Eternity in this universe with whom the creativity starts. When one abandons ones needs and goes for left over which is symbolical of Brahma, the Creator (*yajnye hutassistasya odanasya sarvajnayatakarabhuta bramhavedena*),

One, in fact makes the shift from outer harmony to inner harmony where the Divine manifest itself in the self or the poet. Then only the poet is transported to the higher plane of transcendence where he becomes one with the Universal Self and the creativity takes place.

These two forms of harmony may sometimes move in parallel or may at times coalesce with each other or at other time disentangle themselves from each other. In any event these forms are responsible in the creative act leading to the expression of beauty.

To conclude, it is not the outer harmony but the inner aesthetic harmony caused by superfluity defines art. In our lives all around us are scattered things of our needs, of our desires and of our material interest but if we can remain untouched by them and pass through the world without carrying impression, any impact, any scratch only then in that state of super abundance the creativity takes place and the inner harmony of art is realised.

Notes and References

1. Quoted by I.N. Choudhuri "Poems and Paintings of Tagore: An integrated Vision", Comparative Indian Literature: Some Perspective, p. 230, Delhi, 1992
2. The prefatory note that Tagore wrote for the catalogue of his exhibition of paintings at the city gallery of Birmingham in 1930
3. In a letter to Leonard Elmhirst, Tagore wrote "You have expressed your hope that this pen of yours will help me

in my cult of frenzied drawing. You had the opportunity of observing me in the flowering session of my eccentricity which comes from an excess of dream energy. I have hardly enough left of it even for writing poems. Of late I have occasionally been compelled to write prose compositions which tracks across them of scratches— but they remain there undisturbed like a maze of deserted trenches in a self-ravaged battlefield. Pages full of them rebuke me in pathetic silence claiming for some harmony in this anarchy of forms.” Letter to Leonard Elmhirst, The Tagore Centre, London 1991a:98

4. Sovan Sen, Tagore’s Paintings: Versification in Line, p.17, 2011
5. These comments recall of W.G. Archer on Abanindranath in his ‘India and Modern Art’ :
 “ As (Abanindranath’s style) developed over a period of thirty years, it became identified with certain qualities – hesitant, indecisive line, misty vagueness of form, sombre murkiness of colour, likings for wistful girlish stances, dainty wanness, anaemic sentimentality... due, in part , to the mystical nature of Havell’s teaching... In essence, however, they derive from the contemporary (cultural) situation. They are the qualities that go with tepid shrinkage from reality, faltering distrust, a failure in courage.” W. G. Archer, India and Modern Art, London, 1959, p.37
6. MS original at Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan; letter published in Visva-Bharati Patrika, Magh- Chaitra 1353 (Jan.- April 1947), pp. 135-6

7. See, Sovan Sen, Tagore's Paintings: Versification in Line, p.19, 2011
8. See, the article by Subramanyan, K.G. "The Amateur and the Professional" from the book *Rabindranth Tagore and the Challenges of Today*, eds. Bhudeb Chaudhuri and K. G. Subramanyan. This reference is taken from the article Tagore's Paintings: a Creation of *Geniusi* Rajdeep Konar Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India
9. Letter to Ramananda Chattopadhyaya, December 18, 1931, Chitipatra, Vol 12, Visva-Bharati,1986
10. See, Tagore's paintings: Versification in Line, Sovan Sen, p. 33 2011
11. Bidou Henri, Rabindranath Tagore's Drawings, Visva-Bharati Quarterly, May-October,1941
12. A poem 'Question' by Tagore
13. Tagore, 'The Crisis of Civilization', The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Vol iii, (Ed. Sisir Kumar Das), p.726, 1996
14. Prithwish Neogy, ' Drawings and Paintings of Rabindranath Tagore, A Centenary Volume: Rabindranath Tagore 1861-1941, Sahitya Akademi, 1987, 3rd print
15. Rabindranath Tagore, 'Autographical' (Talks in China), The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume ii, (Ed. Sisir Kumar Das), 1996, p. 585
16. Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Spirit of Japan',The English Writings of Rabindrath Tagore, Vol iii, (Ed. Sisir Kumar Das), 1996, p.368
17. M. Hiriyanna, Indian Philosophical Studies (1957), pp.95-96, Mysore.

18. Tagore, Atmaparichaya, Rabindra Rachanabali, X
Vol. p.206
19. Tagore, 'What is Art', Sadhana, The English Writings
of Tagore, Vol ii, (Ed. Sisir Kumar Das),
1996, pp.348-362
20. Tagore, Atmaparichaya, Rabindranath, Vol X, p. 182
21. I.N. Choudhuri, 'Shakuntalam in the context of
Western Dramatic Art and Modern Aesthetics',
Comparative Indian Literature: Some Perspectives,
1992, p.158