

Tagore : His philosophy and Poetry and the issues of the East West relationship, Modernity and Tradition and Nationalism

In literature, one realises, that on one side of it stays philosophy and on the other side history. But a great poet is not a system builder of philosophy nor does he analyse the course of history but implicitly goes on interpreting the inevitable force and weight of history and develops his philosophical ideas. Both Tagore's poetry and prose embody his philosophy. He, in his Hibbert lectures, describes India as an idea and not a mere geographical fact and the idea of India as he describes in his acceptance speech of the Nobel Prize, which he received after eight years of its declaration in 1921, is the spirit of unity of all races and, by quoting Upanishad he gives this philosophical message, which he says is the message of the East to the West

“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 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, one can see the unity and this unity gives the message of truth.

Here the microcosm and the macrocosm, the inner and the outer world coalesce together. Here the emphasis is on the inner experience of man; it asserts the identity of man with a deep hidden reality. The idea strikes us at once when we look at a western painting of Christ, praying with his eyes open and gazing deep in the outer space (Bhootakasa).

The other is the immortal face of Buddha gazing deep within the inner space (Chidakasha). Tagore finds this hidden reality in nature and calls it *Jivana Devata*, Lord of my Life. Tagore says that this is his creative power- the power that has helped him to come to terms with his life's joys and sorrows and to unite him with this universe. In a poem Tagore talks of the diverse manifestation of *Jivana Devata*:

"I seem to have loved you in numberless forms, numberless times

In life after life, in age after age forever

My spell-bound heart has made and re-made the neckless of songs

That you take as a gift, wear round your neck

In your many forms

In life after life, in age after age forever."

In 'The Cycle of Spring', Tagore says: "We (poets) set men free from their desires." In these words he lays his finger on the true function of art as the pathway to freedom. The artist helps us to forget the bonds with the world, and reveals to us the invisible connections by which we are bound up with eternity. But that does not mean that Tagore is ignoring the world. In one of his poems he said that I do not want to leave this beautiful world; I want to stay among the people of the world and want to hear the flute being played by the limitless in the midst of this limited world which makes it so appealing and delightful and there and then the unity between the self and the universal self (Jivana Devata) is established.

Tagore once said, "I want nothing else if only I can remain unknown to the entire civilized world and sitting in a corner of my country collect her love like a bee to fill my hive. On one side he had this truly unsocial nature and on the other side he had to come to England and Europe again and again for recognition and appreciation and this duality became the supreme tragedy of his existence, though, it did not affect his writings and in fact they, or the other, or the West had a place in his thinking.

For the Western world also the orient was the 'other' and our literature, philosophy were located in the context of Indian culture, especially religious philosophy. West developed a myopic vision of Indian thought as religious, spiritual and transcendental. The other, an inalienable entity external to one self is both a source of terror and an object of desire for the West.

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.

The Western view is 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. For Tagore the 'other' was never a source of reference to define one's own identity as it was for the Europeans.

Let us not forget that just three years before he wrote 'Gitanjali(1912); 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."

This is India's all-embracing age old vision of human unity. This includes the entire world in it and rejects any kind of narrow nationalism. Tagore says it clearly that we have missed the character of India as one related to the world. India has always sought to find the oneness of existence through the multifariousness of the universe. Tagore posits the idea that the history of the growth of freedom is the history of the perfection of human relationship and hence i) freedom and ii) unity of mankind are the two voices of Tagore which were two very important aspects of India's civilizational values.

Let me here present my first thesis by rejecting a well-entrenched view about Tagore that his main contention was to bring a synthesis between the West and the East for a true resurgence of India and a well-meaning message of spirituality to the West. On the contrary his theory was that there is no other way open to us in the East, but to go along with Europeanization and to go through it. Only through this voyage into the foreign and strange can we win back our own selfhood. Going through does not mean acceptance but understanding it. In 'Home and the World' Tagore further justifies 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.... Now, when in the present time of political unrest the children of the same great India cry for rejection of the West I feel hurt.... We must discover the most profound unity, the spiritual unity between the different races. We must go deeper down to the spirit of races, other human individuals, and realize that his work is to bring 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."

The voyage into the foreign creates a space where one can talk to another tradition, feel it, touch it and then realise one's own power, own self. It is a radical departure from an approach arising from colonized consciousness, where the

encounter was always conceived between the spirituality of the East and materialism of the West. 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 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. By using the term from Charles Taylor, one remains a bounded and buffered self if one remains suspicious of the porous self of the enchanted world or the enchanted East. Imitating our poet-philosopher Tagore, one can add that 'where knowledge is free' and 'where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way in the dreary desert sand of dead habit', there and then the buffered self is demolished to allow the porous self to enter and flower.

The concept of human unity so assiduously nurtured by Tagore is now at the centre of philosophical discussion in the West. Emmanuel Levinas, in fact proposed a model for thinking the self-other relation in his book 'Totality and Infinity' (1961)

which Derrida revisited in his own essay 'Violence and Metaphysics'(1967) which states that the philosophy seeks to grasp the other and so doing reduces the 'absolute alterity' of the other to the self-same. However, Levinas sees this operation in the work of Husserl in his 'Cartesian Meditations' which constitutes the other in terms of the self-same as an alter ego and here the ambivalence of the Western mind becomes visible because the alter ego is not the self-same. This is further demonstrated in the present Western concept of 'multiculturalism' and the slogan that 'The World is a village' because both are handy political weapons to be used to hoodwink the minorities or to surreptitiously invite other countries to the war, an unholy war, against terror. It can never come anywhere nearer to Tagore's concept of human unity or the age old concept "Vasudhaiva Kutumbukam."

On the issue of modernity and Indian tradition of continuity both Tagore and Gandhi warned us in the beginning of the 20th century about the danger of developing a colonial mentality or mental colonisation. Tagore said in those days that true modernism is freedom of mind and not slavery of taste. He observed, "You must apply your Eastern mind, your spiritual strength, your love of simplicity, your recognition of social obligations in order to cut out a new path for this great unworldly car of progress shrieking out its loud discards as it runs"

In another essay Tagore said, "Once you did solve the problems of man to your own satisfaction and evolved your own art of living- all this you must apply now to the present

situation and out of it will arise a new creation and not a mere repetition, a creation which the soul of your people will own for itself and proudly offer to the world as its tribute to the welfare of man.”

By redefining the terms of discourse in terms of the creative expression of Asian autonomy and individuality in the pursuit of ‘true modernity’ in all fields, Tagore and Gandhi were setting, as it were, a fresh agenda to understand our modernity.

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 different from the past. In this difference he was trying to draw out the meaning of enlightenment, or the definition of modernism. For Tagore any great art is the expression of both the tradition and the actual. To be uprooted from tradition is tantamount to alienation from one’s own self.

May I now here present my second thesis that for Tagore what India needed was to regain her selfhood through a process of decolonization of the self itself which no outside agency but only our own tradition could have set in motion. West sought to colonize India’s sense of time and establish that its present being merely a corruption of the past.

In India, modernism as a phenomenon or value is not an absolutely unrelated one without reference to the past or the future. It absorbs in it traditional values as well as new innovations and is indicated by the term 'continuity'. It is essential to do that because the spirit of India, as says Tagore or as the writers have observed over the ages, is not to reject anything. Everything has a place here as an alternative. India lives with many alternatives which become part of the continuity of thought and creativity and hence the choice which Gandhi or Tagore offered to us was not tradition versus modernism, but the choice of both versus the forced acceptance of one. This is the Indian way of thinking. Our thinking is not logo-centric and exclusive, but symbolic or inclusive and hence India has no problem to live with many life choices and this is possible because as said by Tagore, one has the freedom of mind, and also as he mentions in his essay on 'Modernity in Literature', accepts element of universality as well as permanence and expresses the profundity of aesthetic joy.

But for all practical purposes, one can say that whatever is western is modern. This kind of an idea is based on a counterfeit concept very cleverly designed by the colonial masters that westernization is modernization. There is no doubt that the largest corpus of ideas, thoughts, modes and methods, etc., of our life in the present and recent times are admittedly western by origin, yet the fact remains that in the process of our becoming modern something was happening within ourselves, that, in spite of our acceptance of Western modernization, we were doubtful about its value and results,

and were constantly searching for our own modernity. The West develops through substitution and it writes itself again and again. India develops through accommodation. It is, as says Tagore, like a sea of great humanity where all are merged in one body. Here new ideas may supplant older ones, but the older ones linger on. They are allowed to co-exist with what is new. Here one does not reject to create one's modernity.

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

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. So deep is Tagore's love of nature that to him every aspect of nature becomes a symbol of beauty. He does not love nature for its own sake, but because he views it

as an attribute of the divine; not for the abundance of joy that it brings into life, but for the intimations it gives of a higher spiritual life. To him even a blade of grass or an atom of dust brings a message from unknown. In fact for Tagore nature and man or society are revelations of the divine spirit. The same light dwells in the world outside and the world within but we do not realize it because of our ignorance and small ego. This is so beautifully described by Tagore in an incident which took place in his life:

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 the door of the small houseboat the moon came dancing in. The moon filled the house with its splendour. Rabindranath remained silent for a moment. It was such a sacred experience. He went out of the house, and the moon was so 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 next morning, "The beauty was all around me, but a small candle had been preventing it. Because of the light of the candle, the light of the moon could not enter." Our small flame of the ego, our small flame of the mind and its consciousness was preventing the whole universe from rushing into us.

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? Indian 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 sceptre and a torch. As a result in 1882 in *Prabhat Sangeet* Tagore could give a call for freedom in the words “bhang, bhang, bhang kara’ (break, break, break the prison) and in the words of *Sonar Tari* (1894), “niruddeshye yatra kothaye aamake niye jabe re swapansundari?”- “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

Romantic Movement 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.

The political shape it took shows the limit and universal conflicts of Romanticism that became apparent in the Tagore-Gandhi controversial debate of 1921 on Charkha and boycott and burning of foreign made clothes. In his speech on "Call of Truth" at the University Institute in Calcutta Tagore 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." Tagore made at least one thing clear that if Romanticism is a movement for national freedom, then it also accepts the universalism of the Enlightenment.

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 who for want of strength could not be coaxed into a flutter of their wings." In Indian Romanticism, around 1920-21 and thereafter as well, the hungry bird also finds its place.

Tagore calls himself a born romantic but this romanticism, as already explained is different than the Western Romanticism. Tagore defines this while explaining the romantic verse and

prose plays of Kalidasa as poetry of an individual poet who has the power to sound, through his own joys and sorrows, his imagination and experiences, the eternal emotion of universal man and the innermost truth of human life. Tagore's romanticism speaks of the spiritual bond between the self and the universal self and rejects any kind of narrow approach related to humanity. This brings us to the issue of nationalism.

Tagore posits the idea that the history of the growth of freedom is the history of the perfection of human relationship and hence i) freedom and ii) unity of mankind are the two voices of Tagore which were two very important aspects of India's civilizational values. This is India's all-embracing age-old vision of human unity. This includes the entire world in it and rejects any kind of narrow nationalism.

In fact his nationalistic zeal 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 moving 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.

The idea of the modern nation-state entered Indian society in the 2nd half of the 19th Century. Most nationalist leaders were unhappy about the absence of a proper nation-state and thought that it led to India's backwardness.

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 (a fair founded by the Tagore family to promote indigenous goods, ideas and Hindu-Muslim unity in 1867) 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 view points 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.

For Tagore India was not territorial (mrinmaya) but ideational (chinmaya). He said that I love India but my India is an idea and not a geographical expression.

He said that the word nation is not in our language. India has never had a real sense of western nationalism. Society is in the core of India's civilization and politics is in the core of western civilization and hence the importance which Europe gave to freedom we gave to liberation of the soul. Tagore said, form

yourself into a nation (nation with a small n) to mean society which was relevant to humanity and stop the encroachment of Nation with a capital N to mean a nation-state or the nations of the West which has a i) self destructive tendency, ii)) which turns violent, iii) snatches one's freedom, iv) spreads a homogenized universalism and v) makes one selfish and exclusive.

Tagore was for non-parochial inclusive nationalism relevant to humanity. It is very difficult to understand it as people did not understand how a man could bring freedom to a country by the help of salt and charkha as the medieval devotional poets brought a religio-social revolution with the help of chadar(sheet), chunari(scarf) or seeds and earth.

Tagore did not reject nationalism but formed his own understanding of it by studying what was authentic in his country's history. He thought

i) it was essential for us to fight against social injustice rather than political freedom;

ii to work for an adjustment of races, to acknowledge the real differences between them and yet seek some basis of unity,

iii) not to accept violent and exclusive patriotism as our final spiritual shelter but seek refuge in humanity and hence his motto for Viswabharati was *yatra viswam bhavet eka nidam* where the world meets in a nest;

iv) not to accept the concept of violent nationalism from the west which would mean selling our own inheritance and

v) Tagore never wanted the idea of the Indian nation to supersede the idea of Indian civilization. Tagore, as said earlier, believed in non-parochial inclusive nationalism (unself-critical Indian nationalism: Ashis Nandi) and also in patriotism which rejected violent nationalism hence he could make such a statement that I am not a patriot – I shall ever seek my compatriots all over the world (letter of Tagore to Andrews). This kind of a statement created a false impression in the minds of a large number of Indians who even attacked him and still being attacked for the ‘insufficient nationalism’ expressed in his song ‘Jana gana mana’ which became the national song of India. However, Western nationalism which became a strong basis of a nation-state became illegitimate for him as explained in detail by Ashis Nandi. Both Tagore and Gandhi created a moral universe and made it a part of politics and gave a bigger lofty meaning to nationalism.

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;
- vi) The West is now seriously thinking has nation-state failed?

Now nationalism looks like a dark elemental unpredictable primeval power which Tagore called *bhougolick opodevata*. Tagore but at the same time spoke loudly about

- i) Living in freedom and reasoning in freedom
- ii) and also in his letter to viceroy after the Amritsar massacre Tagore analyzed the nature of brutality and opposed the attack on humanity.

Tagore did not ignore the state but it was not a deciding factor for him. State and community both were important for him and both were complementary to each other.

His statement was that in nation dominated countries the core of the country resides in its nationhood and in society dominated countries the core of the country is felt everywhere. Tagore wanted to revive the society –in the society of every village there remained an inner society (*aatmiya samaj*) of friendliness and cooperation. Both Gandhi and Tagore wanted villages to be brought into the limelight and for that he opted for *swadeshi* where still resides the basic values of Indian culture and which are self-dependent. National unity could become a reality only when the masses get an instinctive feeling about it and for that educated classes and masses must unite into a common programme of work to make the country our own and prosperous.

This is the idea of India of Tagore and his philosophy which finds place in his poetry as well as in his prose writings. This idea of India and the philosophy is related to Tagore's notion of internationalism, his attitude to politics and culture, nationalism and internationalism, tradition and modernity, and cross-cultural education. All these can be seen in the light of his strong attachment to living in freedom and reasoning in freedom.