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Rabindranath Tagore: A Reappraisal of His Universality and Relevance

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Abstract:

Rabindranath Tagore stands as a millennium in himself reflecting the ancient Indian wisdom through the raptures of his lyrics and mystic vision. His metaphysical bent of mind was quite rooted to the realities of his time inasmuch as he served as an anchor of intellectual moorings upon which the emerging nation state was to set foot on to shape a new course of journey. As a liberal humanist he advocated for Inclusive nationalism. The national anthem itself speaks of universality of Indian thought. He crystallised the Indian Renaissance of new awakening in the 19th century via the path of Bengal Renaissance which first stimulated all the Indian vernaculars of a promise of lofty creative potentials. Tagor's international repute as the first noble Laureate of Asia helped the subalterns to gain a voice during freedom struggle. Though the English translation of his poems and other literary works lost the vitality of language, the mellifluous rhyming quality, lyrical beauty and the word-magic but the power of his vision continues to be a source of great inspiration for whoever reads them. This paper is attempted to illumine on Tagore's universality as a poet-seer and his relevance in modern time when the world is still reeling under indeterminacy of post modern fluidity that continues to witness global terrorism, religious hatred, racism, rampant corruption and discrimination of various sorts. Hence, it is worth that the myriad minded man, 'the East of Suez', may be reviewed afresh for his universality and relevance ever.

Keywords: Avant –Garde, East-West, eternal, globalization, liberal humanist, 'mantra, religion, Renaissance, Trinity, truth. Time-Space-Causation.

Introduction:

The body of his art and philosophy stands as a perfect harmony of truth and beauty, for he devoted his whole life in harmonizing the material and the spiritual, not by renouncing, but by rejoicing amid the whirlwind of the world. Gandhi revered him as Gurudev, and he fulfilled the aspirations of both the East and the West combining in him the role of a political thinker, an artist, a social reformer, a philosopher, an internationalist and someone, as stated by Ezra Pound, who stands for mankind. The poems of the *Gitanjali* are only a few drops of Tagore's ocean of creation in diversified fields of knowledge. Ezra Pound felt that 'Tagore's lines contained the harmonious complexity which characterized all great art' (Hurwitz: 55) and he compared the *Gitanjali* with Dante's the *Paradiso* what justifies the universal appeal of those poems. He was not happy of a poor reception of Tagore in England in 1912, who he considered a unique genius

carrying the Eastern light to the Western land, and clarified the conception of him to the people saying that:

“... Rabindranath Tagore is not to be confused . . . with any Theosophist propaganda; nor with any of the various missionaries of the seven and seventy isms of the mystical East. He is an artist pure and simple, an author whose voice has almost as many shades as one might have expected from Voltaire and whose sense of humor is as delicate as that of any writer in Paris”(Quoted in Hurwitz: 57).

He has left the highest number of creative works in this world that includes more than 1200 songs with music composition, 38 plays, equaling the number of Shakespeare's, 12 novels, 200 short stories, more than 2,700 pictures, let alone his direction, stage-setting, acting and choreography which sprang from his power of perception, rather than from any logical speculation or existing philosophical treatise. His philosophy and poetic vision fuse into one leading to a universal religion in which everyone is to struggle to realise the universal soul harmonizing the material outside and the spiritual within. He termed it a “ Poet's religion” and it begins from epistemological quest of perceiving the validity of any knowledge or reality beyond the realms of sensory organs what he put himself as, “Reality cannot be known by the intellect, the infinite has to be realized by the individual in his intuitive experience”(Mukherjee:46). Hence, his intuitive poetic experience is the insight of a seer which is expressed through poetry and lyrics. It is not simply his sign language; his power of personality dwells in every word as magical power that carries effect. His poesy is the mirror of the spirit reflecting the highest aspirations and longings of the soul of Man. All feeling and effort to express it emanate from the common source of our divine inheritance. In doing so, as Strickland writes, “ He has bestowed an inestimable benefit on India in the enrichment of her literature and the ennobling and spiritualizing of India's musical ideals, and his creations will be known and loved wherever there are lovers of the good and beautiful in art’ (:473).

Tagore was always ahead of his time. He could visualize the future of India and the world and hence, he advocated for a world order based on pure love for humanity, cutting across all the narrow bounds hitherto. He was not happy the way Indian freedom struggle was heading to as all selfish motives and divisiveness were gaining ground. He did not actively participated in politics, yet took upon himself the responsibility to correct the temper of people's mindset through his songs and essays. He was criticized of his aloofness from the mainstream politics, but he remained calm of such adverse remarks as he had a greater role to play as the Indian guru to correct the society with intellectual honesty and nourishing it with the spirit of universality by his sheer poetic power what Rushbrook found that: “...he constitutes, as it were, the conscience of his nation, the embodiment at once of ancient wisdom and of modern requirement (634).As a man of action and pure in heart, he always responded to the needs of the people and reacted at an appropriate moment. The world is well aware of his historic letter to Lord Chelmsford, the British viceroy, repudiating his Knighthood in protest for Jalianwalla Bagh mass killing of unarmed protesters. The letter reflects the strong sense of his commitment to the nation. Tagore is relevant in the present condition of unchecked corruption and economic crisis of India that needs such committed people. A modern Bengali poetess has expressed her views on how Tagore is a tremendous influence in the very fabric of our nation:

When I go through his constructive ideas of farming, co-operative, economic and rural development, education, vocational education, self-employment, problems of language, communalism, separatism, casteism, and his attitude towards international affairs, sometimes I feel, he is almost writing for our present socialist society. His every idea was taken into our Constitution and the Five-Year Plans knowingly or unknowingly and I do not know how that happened (How relevant is Tagore today? 25).

He united not only the East and the West, but also engraved a stamp of Indianness among the princely states of India which were so different culturally and linguistically since thousands of years under different kings and Badshahs' (monarch). The formation of British India in 1858 in the aftermath of the 'Sepoy Mutiny' of 1857 was a political consolidation, but binding force of it as a nation state was infused by him as he called India as 'the ocean of humanity'. He brought to the Indian soil the appraisal of the Western thought and philosophy to the common mass who knew a little or had only superficial knowledge and transported the Eastern message to the west, thereby creating better regards for Indian values, especially for the efforts of the Indian reformers and the effort bore fruit as the nascent state of a nation- state matured into being in dependent India in 1947. Gandhi fuelled India's national struggle in which Tagore provided the intellectual spark. Two great souls of the soil had their disagreement too as, "Tagore pressing for more room for reasoning, and for a less traditionalist view, a greater interest in the rest of the world, and more respect for science and for objectivity generally (Tagore & His India).

Traditionalist view, as Tagore understood, would divide India into narrow bounds of language and community. He undertook to prepare the race on a firm moral and intellectual ground. "Tagore advocated a universal mind that saw beyond geographic and political borders. He promoted freedom of thought and appealed to fundamental importance of science and reason in India and abroad. Even in his nationalism in India in the early twentieth century, he saw the greatest goal to be the end of imperialism and its concomitant oppression or threat to freedom. Nationalism, he argued, created artificial boundaries in the world, which could not help but affect the world of ideas (Endless Dawns: 9-10).

Such a broader view of nationalism required education for the masses and hence, he envisioned an educational idea that can accommodate the purpose of social, political, and economic well being, all rolled into one, for all. Education is just not for gaining knowledge; it is to attain fullness of life by connecting the self with expansion of sympathy and sensibility with the world. Modern Indian Education system following Macaulay's Minute of 1832 that imposed like a 'strait-waistcoat' upon the great Indian culture produced only the rote and the clerks. Tagore writes in *Creative Unity*, 'Let us not exist as the eternal rag-pickers in other people's dust-bins.' Culture must be free; must be autonomous (Quoted in Catlin: 622) none the less, 'he welcomed with open arms the impact of the ideas of West upon East and of East upon West. So far, as much as Goethe, he was a great world-citizen (622). The idea of 'Visva-Bharati' was envisioned to connect the entire human race in the pursuit of truth, beauty and goodness cutting across all barriers of race, religion or nation which, in turn, would aid India's obligation of offering the best it has to the world in return of the best it receives.

The present era of globalization was anticipated and translated in reality through his international university as a global platform of cross- cultural interaction in which each one realizes that " artists in all parts of the world have created forms of beauty, scientists discovered

secrets of the universe, philosophers solved the problems of existence, saints made the truth of the spiritual world organic in their own lives, not merely for some particular race to which they belonged, but for all mankind' (Tagore 1922:171-2). As an Avant -Garde of modern educationist the world is indebted to him as, "many of his ideals have been shared by educational thinkers in the West and the East, in fact by thinkers in all countries of the world, but Tagore's special contribution lay in the emphasis on harmony, on balance, on all-sided development of the human personality" (Mysticism and Humanity of Tagore: 105). Thus, Visva-Bharati is an idea of a miniature world sown as a small seed for the world to emulate what ultimately has shown way of today's globalization and common currency like 'Euro' which was quite inconceivable during his time of imperialism and holocaust. In modern times when, "A study of the evolution of Western educational thought presents a picture of reactionism: each new solution immediately begs a corresponding new problem, and always threatens to bring the older edifice down" (Zainulabideen, ips.org), Tagore's vision is relevant evermuch. When hatred, differentiations and blood bath still continues in this world as before, it's time to look back to his message of universal love to broaden our hearts for a lasting peace in this planet.

The world today is wild with the delirium of hatred,
 The conflicts are cruel and unceasing in anguish,
 Crooked are its paths, tangled its bonds of greed.
 All creatures are crying for a new birth of thine,
 O Thou of boundless life,
 Save them, rouse thine eternal voice of hope,
 Let Love's lotus with its inexhaustible treasure of honey
 Open its petals in thy light (Gitanjali, Sacred text).

With an idea of bridging the gap between the East and West as well as between science and humanities, Tagore and Einstein came together as two forms of a single sun of knowledge and wisdom in two different continent of an international community of intellectuals, for, "both Einstein and Tagore functioned in a world of international scholars who sought out one another across national boundaries and disciplines to share their thoughts about the contemporary world(Endless Dawns :10).Tagore as an educationist and internationalist promoted freedom of thought and appealed to fundamental importance of science and reason in India and abroad. Einstein paid his obeisance to Tagore writing a festschrift, *The Golden Book of Tagore*, in honor of his seventieth birthday. The famous dialogue with Einstein, both plumbing the truth, is an epoch making revelation of the validity of structuralism as well as its limitations as according to Tagore, the world in itself is a relative phenomenon and its structures depends on our consciousness. The limits of consciousness make it differential. But ultimately it is, "one eternal entity. We have to realize it through our emotions and activities. We realize the supreme man, who has no individual limitations, through our limitations" (Mukto-mona).

Truth or beauty, for Einstein, was independent of human being, of human consciousness. He just believed in them, where as Tagore visualized it to believe and preach that 'truth which is one with the universal being, must be essentially human'. It can be realized by merging the individual to infinity and such a truth cannot belong to science. Ilya Prigogine, who won the Nobel Prize for chemistry in 1977 comments in his book that, "scientific knowledge about human perception and the natural world may be leaning toward the position Tagore staked out in the Einstein conversation (quoted in Endless Dawns: 15). Even Noble Laureate Amartya Sen's

assessment is worth quoting here in terms of Tagore's scientific idea: "[He] insisted on open debate on every issue, and distrusted conclusions based on a mechanical formula, no matter how attractive that formula might seem in isolation" (Quoted in *Endless Dawns*: 18)).

As a human being Tagore struggled for universal freedom and different creative arts were his maturing reflection toward that direction. Nature, he held very dearly, yet refused to be limited under her whole mystery. At this stage he was restless to realise his infinite presence and hence, attempted to fuse the trinity (Man, Nature & God) with poetry and music with the stamp of his universal spirit. His lyrics formed not only the national anthems of two separate countries, but also reached a diversified public, from the lay man to the Avant- Guards of Indian subcontinent. His flowing verses are the words of wisdom and light of the never setting sun god, as his name itself suggests and whose music is the soul of India, idealizing all the greatest of Indian civilization since the time of the Vedas. Lily Strickland has corroborated it in better terms:

Rabindranath Tagore, more than any poet of modern India, has found inspiration in the harmonies of the universe; his inner ear has been open to the spiritual voices of nature and the ideal aspirations of man as expressed in the invisible forces of the cosmos. Being alive to the divine manifestations of music in this rhythmic world, he has set down his inspirations and impressions in the form of poetry and music... That he is the greatest musician and composer "East of Suez," is not so widely known abroad (463).

Tagor's poetry, art and music may be contrasted with the postmodern fluidity of meaning. Despite all the theories of deconstruction that a text undermines itself, Tagore stands as a formidable challenge intersecting the 19th and 20th century modernity. Deconstruction may be a means of differentiation amid all perceptual variations; but if the variations, stretched in terms of linguistic signs, are fuse into a symphony, harmonizing all the different notes of music through words; then the application of any such critical paradigm loses its meaning. Tagore represents India through his art inasmuch as he is a *Vedantic* saint singing the raptures that's not bound in believing in a principle, rather it is being and becoming beyond the limitations of sensory organs, for he realized that religion is, "the awareness of the loving union of the soul of the living being with the super soul or *paratma* (Religion of man: 33). The concept of infinity pervades his work which is not to be realized in isolation, but by clutching on the finite consciousness. And this finitude, unlike Platonic or *Advaita* philosophy of unreality of the world, is inseparable from the infinity or God. Thus, his poetry does not straight jacket one into believing a principle or theological doctrine, rather it illumines one into the ecstatic glory of the divine, whose play of perpetual variations and differentiations are trapped through the poet's Theurgistic power of perception and presented as song offerings.

When Tagore sailed to the west and W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Einstein and other literary and science luminaries came around him, deconstruction still then did not surface as a philosophical quest, yet he probably understood that everything would be scanned under postmodern, post structural lens and that they would remain as the part of the process of differentiations, never reaching integration. Tagore could integrate the material and the spiritual, the mundane and the quintessential uniting Man, Nature and God into one Trinity in which one would be bewildered at the fluidity of postmodernism in so far one is under the hold of time-space-causation and when one is purged of one's limited ego, all the variations would slide into one infinite presence, beyond sensory organs and beyond the limit of its pronouncement. Hence, at a differential plane nature is a sweet mother, the most caring nurse and an inseparable

companion, who kept on playing music to his thirsting ears and searching mind and seems to have allowed him to ransack its softest recesses of heart to tap varying strains of music that goes on incessantly as a throb of universal cry for freedom. That's why his songs and music are a unique of uniqueness bringing peace and harmony to whosoever lays their ear to it.

Ezra Pound and several others were enthralled in "Tagore Evening" organized by William Rothenstein at Hampstead Heath in 1912 and Rothenstein remarks: "the young poets came to sit at Tagore's feet; Ezra Pound the most assiduously" (Hurwitz:53).The materialist and rationalist world of Western society began to feel the pinch of loss of Religious or moral hold on the society and any firm moorings upon which to perpetuate the civilization at the dawn of 20th century, what just culminated in the First World War in 1914 and what William Golding in his essay observed later in this context: "Marx, Darwin and Freud are the three most crashing bores of the Western World. Simplistic popularization of their ideas has thrust our world into a mental straitjacket from which we can only escape by the most anarchic violence" (William Golding Quotes) and Tagore's advent in 1912 around the European intellectuals was just a relief for all of them as: "Ezra Pound found in Tagore the indications of a new world of faith and peace...new Greece, suddenly"(quoted in Nabaneeta:282).In fact it did so as he compared Tagore with Boccaccio and Dante not only in terms of versification but also for a regenerating effect on all western readers: "The Bengali brings to us the pledge of a calm which we need evermuch in an age of steel and mechanics. It brings a quiet proclamation of the fellowship between man and the gods; between man and nature" (Hurwitz: 55).

A century after the Nobel Prize, a reader is haunted by two striking questions: Tagor's declining impact in the West and his relevance today. Tagore had so many adversaries amid his overwhelming admirers of Nobel laureates and scholars from all over the world of his time. Edward C. Dimock comments on Tagore, "But for most non-Indians, he is no longer living. He is an isolated figure. For us, he is not part of a living tradition" (34). Some of the phrases as adverse remarks by a few Western men of letters, who were once his fervent admirers, speak for such detaching impact that led Tagore to oblivion. For example, Yeats used the phrase as, 'Damn Tagore'; Bertrand Russell criticized his philosophy as 'unmitigated rubbish and Bernard Shaw thought of him 'Old Bluebeard'. The basic reasons for declining impact may be poor translation, ideological differences and imperialism. In the context of imperialism, E.P. Thomson has been true to his calling in *Allien Homage* by expressing his father Edward Thompson's 'Epiphany' on Tagore's noble prize and how at a height of Tagore's international reputation , Thompson as an Western Orientalist manipulated and "misrepresented by a long succession of woefully inadequate translations of his work...Thompson was aware that many of the translations were being falsified to meet Western expectations with the encouragement of notably of C.F. Andrews and W.W. Pearson"(Warwick:591).

Darwin's evolutionary theory against the view of creationism in the Western world rendered a rude shock on people's moral beliefs. Ideologically, the Enlightenment shaped the idea of Modernity with the leading role of the West and the idea of Self-consciousnesses was shaping through the means of science and technology, thereby changing the outlook of the society more to Secularism. Too much of it in absence of any firm guiding principles of religion or morality, it entered a post-religious God-less age what Nietzsche proclaimed much before as 'The Death of God'. Thus, Tagore's advocacy on infinity or mysticism could hardly hold any belief that any metaphysical forces can govern human life.

Poor translation, certainly, stands as a major obstacle to present the original flavor of rhyming, diction, and the power of word-magic through invented metaphors. The exact impact of beauty and grandeur could only be realised in the particular language and any rendering of translation would lose that power of the original. When the *Gitanjali* made a stir in the Western world since 1912, the reviewers were aware of the fact that the collection of poems were but a few gems of the whole and that the lyrical beauty suffered in the process of transmission. That Tagore was not adept in translation is observed by Nabaneeta:

Tagore succeeds in changing the complexion of an entire poem. Moreover, there are innumerable examples where beautiful Bengali metaphors are elaborately murdered in his unimaginative translation. The translations are not only of poorer quality than the originals but they are distorted. They are examples of a completely different standard of creative power. His creative potentialities were abused in the translations (Nabaneeta Sen: 279).

What prompted him to continue pouring writings in English and Bengali translations despite the fact that he was aware of the limitations of translation and unpalatable reactions such as Yeats' wish that Tagore must cast off English, is his sense of responsibility as a poet of carrying the Eastern wisdom to the western world.

The Western world and even the other language people of India are deprived of the height of an emotional appeal of Tagor's songs that transports one at once to a finer spirit with subtlety of feeling and with all the grandeur of thought and music. Lyrical beauty may be lost, but can the magic of his words as a power of 'mantra' and the eternal qualities be lost any way? There is an element of essence which time cannot wither away:

A music and rhythm almost inconceivable to Western ears with the metaphysical quality, the peculiar subtlety and intensity of Shelley; and that with a simplicity that makes this miracle appear the most natural thing in the world. As far as I know no Western poet yet born has done precisely this. Not Milton; he is far too grandiose for the human heart. Not Wordsworth; he is at once too subtle and too ponderous. And not the great mystic poets of the West, for they are the poets of mystics, as Shelley is the poet of poets; not Crashaw and not Francis Thompson, nor Henry Vaughn nor Blake at his simplest. Not even Dante and St. John of the Cr'oss, though they stand nearest (they are very near) to this great mystic poet of Bengal (Sinclair: 660).

Yeats has in his preface to the *Gitanjali* that: "All the inspirations of mankind are in his hymns. He is the first among our saints who has not refused to live, but has spoken out of Life itself (preface, sacred-texts). All the scientists around the world may get back to Tagore-Einstein conversation and numerous essays and short stories of Tagore, other than his verses, to fathom how far are they close to reality in terms of transcendental values as the discourse makes it clear that both science and humanities are but the expressions of spirituality and higher the development, higher is the spiritual height.

Conclusion:

The whole life of Tagore just evokes a sense that a Himalayan saint in previous birth, incomplete in his search of truth, is sent back by God to complete his journey through poetic vision with fullness of heart and absolute purity of mind as it happened to Max Muller as quoted by Vivekananda, "he remembers with his mind the friendships of former births, firmly rooted in his heart" (Vivekananda 4:282). Similarly, Tagore completed his life's journey not by renouncing the world, but by accepting creative interaction with the world he inherited, by serving the humanity and by purging of all ego in the process of his realization of unity of the inner and the outer world. His was a heart that expanded every day to reach oneness with the Universal. Where others are lost in 'the dreary desert sand of dead habits', he has struck the fountain of the great fair of life of eternal harmony offering it to the world via the Indian ocean of humanity to be drunk by the East and the West for good.

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