

In the World of Men: Tagore's Arrival in the Spiritual Domain of Nationalism

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore was born in a family which, on one hand, inherited a legacy of rich Indian culture, and on the other, did not hesitate to welcome the modernism, freshly arrived from Europe through waves of Enlightenment. He was sent early to England to imbibe the gifts of modern science and rationalism that could lead him to a standard and secured career. But even though the discipline of work, love for liberalism and quest after scientific truth and technological perfection there impressed him much, in its over all effect the West's efforts of de-humanization disappointed Tagore and disillusioned him as well. This led him finally to the realization and reconstruction of the motherland that is India. He came to meet the common man and his everyday sorrows and tears in rural Bengal, in Silaidaha, Patisar and Sazadpur where he was given the duty to look after the family estate. The raw and rough smell of the soil, the whirl of the waves in river Padma, the play of seasons on the strings of nature lent him a unique insight. He learnt to weave his words offering a perfect slide show of mutual reciprocation of man and nature, accompanied by a hitherto unheard melody of folk tune that glorifies the struggles of that life and thereby consolidating it gradually to a consciousness out of which a nation is born. The present essay intends to seek and understand the secrets of that story, which, though lacking miserably in sound and fury, strives towards a steady self emergence and emancipation paving the way for political freedom.

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It is an insult to his humanity if man fails to invoke in his mind a definite image of his own ideal self, of his ideal environment which it is his mission externally to reproduce. It is the highest privilege of man to be able to live in his own creation. His country is not his by mere accident of birth, he must richly and intimately transform it into his own, make it a personal reality. And what is more, man is not truly himself if his personality has not been fashioned by him according to some mental picture of perfection which he has within. His piled up wealth, his puffed up power can never save him from innate insignificance if he has not been able to blend all his elements into a dynamic unity of presentation. (Tagore¹)

Tagore's family background helped him no doubt, but the immediate task at hand was to avail 'a dynamic unity', 'to invoke a definite image', both of the self and the country, and to 'make it a personal reality'. It was decided in the family that, he should be sent to England, and accordingly on September 20, 1878, Rabindranath boarded the ship, S.S. Poona, escorted by his second elder brother Satyendranath. But England failed miserably to touch the height of expectation in the mind of the young visionary:

Before coming to England, I had imagined like a fool that this small island would be filled with Gladstone's oratory, Max Muller's explications of the Vedas, Tyndall's scientific theories, Carlyle's deep thoughts and Bain's Philosophy. I suppose I was lucky to be disappointed. Just like anywhere else, women here are preoccupied with fashions, men with their jobs, and politics is a source of great excitement.²

So was London, that betrayed the imagination of the young poet with its dismal look, 'such a dismal city I had never seen before, smoky, foggy and wet, and everyone jostling and in a hurry....It seemed as if Nature wore a perpetual frown, the sky was turbid and the light of the day lacked luster like a dead man's eye.'³ Even the people there could not interest the sensitive heart:

The people here imagine that I knew nothing of civilization until my arrival here. The other day Dr-'s brother tried to explain to me at length what a camera was and at an evening party Miss- asked me if I had ever seen a piano before.⁴

Little was it known then that the disappointment experienced here, had already in silence started adorning the mother land, lying many miles afar, with renewed glory and vigour. Before leaving London in his second visit, in 1891, Tagore wrote in a letter to his niece Indira Devi:

After I have come here I do feel that wretched helpless India is truly my mother. She does not have so much power or splendour as England, but she loves us. Whatever little love, whatever little happiness I have known in my life rest on her lap. The charm and glitter of this place will never be able to bewitch me, how I wish to return to her lap. If I could, residing in one of her neglected corners and remaining totally unknown to the entire civilized world, gather love like a bee overflowing its hive with honey, I would ask for nothing else.⁵

The impetus was gathered in the first visit (1878), when he first experienced, though from a distance, English racial animosity. In a letter sent from England for the readers of Bharati, he wrote even then:

Hundreds of Johns and Joneses and Thomases are found swarming the lanes and by-lanes of this city, whose mothers and fathers and sisters are known to none but to a butcher, a tailor or a coal porter. But the moment they set their foot on any locality in India, their names become a topic of everybody's discourse. The roads through which they pass whip in hand (which understandably is used not merely for the horse), become immediately desolate, all the passersby taking themselves off in a frantic hurry. At their slightest gesticulation trembles the thrones of an Indian king....The fact is, you know, whenever the small is installed in high positions, it makes an ostentatious parade of its highness by exhibiting its red eyes or expanded chest.⁶

Obviously , British imperialism and its exploiting design was getting exposed to the poet, more so, when he went to the House of Commons during his first visit to England and 'noted with regret the plight of the Irish members of the House, who found the House almost deserted whenever one of them got up to speak'.⁷ Extremely displeased and inwardly unmoved the poet felt that, 'the

light of my country, the sky of my country, had been silently calling me⁸, and returned to India. It may be interesting to note that still, the men and the women of his country are not calling him, but only the light, only the sky. And this has its own significance in the growth and development of his poetic self. In spite of getting birth amid the crowded flow of human world, he came to know and feel nature first. Then, when he will be in the boundless lap of nature in Shilaidaha, as we shall see shortly, he will be preoccupied with man, as if fate has destined it that exchanging the environment, she would lead him to the beauty of nature while amid the din and bustle of city and man, and to the mystery of life and its thousands whirlpools, while amid nature's seclusion.⁹ Following the same rule, first came Sandhya Sangeet (Evening Songs, 1882), 'morbid and full of vapours of heated imagination'¹⁰. In Tagore's own words, 'I was busy blowing up a raging flame with the bellows of my emotions'¹¹. The journey for the motion and motivation of life was yet to start. The sunrise was yet to follow.

'My reminiscences', registers the mood of this period in simple words:

The sadness and pain which sought expression in the *Evening Songs* had their roots in the depths of my being. As one's sleep-smothered consciousness wrestles with a nightmare in its efforts to awake, so the submerged inner self struggles to free itself from its complexities and come out into the open. These songs are the history of that struggle.¹²

The struggle ended suddenly. Whose call it was nobody can assert. The sudden call has appeared in Tagore's life at so many vital junctions and has changed its course in such unexpected ways that one, like the poet himself, is forced to see it as the call of providence or *Jiban Debata* (life God). Whatever he has seen, heard or felt, whomever he has met befriended or sang, it is this He, whom he has greeted, loved or song offered. He is everywhere, but mostly He is within. Thus it is that the poet searched everywhere and strove to identify with everyone, but never forgot to return and re-tune the within. To make a bridge between the within and without has ever been one of the chief aims of his poetic cult.

The work started as soon as the sun rose. The poet recalls his sudden illumination in a letter to C.F. Andrews:

It was morning. I was watching the sunrise from Free School lane. A veil was suddenly withdrawn and everything became luminous. The whole scene was one of perfect music- one marvelous rhythm. The houses in the street, the men moving below, the little children playing, all seemed parts of one luminous whole- inexpressibly glorious....Everyone, even those who bored me, seemed to lose their outer barrier of personality, and I was full of gladness, full of love, for every person and every tinniest thing....That morning in Free school lane was one of the first things that gave me inner vision, and I have tried to explain it in my poems. I have felt ever since, that this was my goal: to express the full ness of life, in its beauty, as perfection- if only the veil were withdrawn.¹³

That very day the poem, *The Awakening of the Waterfall*, gushed forth and coursed on like a veritable cascade. The Waterfall, so long it had been frozen, was pre-occupied with snow and cave and hill and nature's seclusion. The moment it awakened from slumber, it had the urge to flow to the world where men and women, children and aged, were waiting alike on both the banks for a dip. The poet uttered in *Kodi o Komol* (Sharps and Flats, 1886):

I do not wish to die to this lovely world.
I wish to live as man among men,
With the sun shining, the flowers in bloom,
And perchance some loving heart responding!
How varied is the game of life on this earth,
Its meetings and partings, its laughter and tears!
Oh to sing of man's joys and pains
And leave behind a melody undying!¹⁴

Later, he himself explained the mental condition he had been passing through during this period:

When I was confined to the house, I looked wistfully through the openings in the parapet of our inner roof-terrace and offered my heart to nature. In my youth it was the world of men that exerted a powerful attraction upon me. I was an outsider, and looked out upon it from the wayside. My mind, on the brink of life, called out to a ferryman sailing away across the waves, as it were, with an eager waving of hands. My life longed to begin its journey.¹⁵

It is during this time he wrote the following lines, with 'a plea to be allowed entry and position within that house of mystery:

This world is sweet, -I do not want to die.
I awnt to live within the stream of humanity.¹⁶

Was this desire provoked by a strict isolation from childhood? The poet offers the first hand explanation, once again:

It is not true that my marked isolation acted as a bar in plunging into the social stream. I see no sign in those of my countrymen who have been in the thick of society all their lives that they enjoy any more than I do a life-giving touch from such intimacy. The social existence of our country has its lofty banks, its flight of steps, and its cool dark waters shadowed by antique trees from whose leafy branches the koel coos its ancient ravishing song. But, for all that, the water is stagnant. Where is its current, where are its waves, when does the high tide rush in from the sea?...Man may be overcome by profound depression in voluptuously lazy seclusion if deprived of commerce with life. From such despondency I have always struggled painfully to break free. My mind refused to respond to the cheap intoxications of political movements, devoid as they were of any national consciousness, completely ignorant of the country, and supremely indifferent to real service of the motherland. I was tormented by a furious impatience, an intolerable dissatisfaction with myself and all around me.¹⁷

That very impatience and dissatisfaction led him to the real world of men and women, which Providence, again unexpectedly opened for him. The picture house of My Reminiscences also closes here, for, now in the poet's words:

The light hearted days of mixing freely with the world at will are over. My journey has now to be completed through the dwelling-places of men. And the good and evil, joy and woe which it thus encounters may not be viewed as pictures. What tumult is going on here! What construction and destruction, conflict and conjunction! I do not have the power to disclose and describe the supreme art with which my Guide joyfully leads me past all obstacle, antagonism and crookedness towards fulfillment of my life's innermost meaning....To analyze an image is to gather only dust, not the spirit of the artist.¹⁸

Around 1890, Rabindranath was asked by his father to take charge of the family's Zamindari in East Bengal and a little part in Orissa. The young man had to obey. He had made a plan of traveling all over North India in a bullock-cart, so as to watch leisurely and at first hand the vast reality of his country's life. Instead, he had to establish himself in a house boat on the river Padma and look after the interests of the family estates and adjust them, as best as he could, to the welfare of his *rayts*. 'Much as he may have shied at first from this onerous responsibility, he was later grateful to his father for having yoked him to it'.¹⁹ Shelaidaha²⁰ widened and strengthened his intimacy with nature, but more than that, it enabled him to get first hand experience of the common flow of life in rural Bengal. In his own words:

I saw all aspects of village life and felt a great keenness to understand the daily routine and varied pageant of their lives...slowly but surely I began to understand the sorrow and the poverty of the villagers and I grew restless to do something about it. I began to feel ashamed of spending my days simply as a land-lord, concerned only with my own profit and loss. So I began to think about what could be done. I did not think helping from outside would help. I began to try and open their minds towards self-reliance.²¹

Benedict Anderson in his analysis had considered Asian and Indian nationalism to be a modern phenomenon, 'inspired by European Enlightenment and Romanticism, incubated in an economic environment enriched by industrial capitalism. This post Enlightenment European phenomenon, according to him, crossed the seas and traveled to Asia and Africa through colonial extension of empires and facilitated the 'making' of nation in these regions by the colonial regime that brought Western Education and introduced print capitalism and created an intelligentsia', who, as Anderson claims, chose their models from the 'official nationalisms' of European or American histories, which 'were copied, adopted, and improved upon'.²² Parth chatterjee, however, refutes this argument by dividing the nation's space into two and claiming the existence of an inner spiritual space where the colonized nation seeks its sovereignty in spite of subjection in the outer public space where it might have undergone Western modular influence:

The material is the domain of the outside, of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had provided its superiority and the East had succumbed. In this domain, then, Western superiority had to be acknowledged, and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an 'inner' domain bearing the essential marks of cultural identity. The greater one's success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one's spiritual culture. This formula is, I think, a fundamental feature of anticolonial nationalism in Asia and Africa.²³

The need to enliven this spiritual culture was realized by Tagore early in his career and it is in his acquaintance with the common people during his Shelaidaha years that he got his pass-port to step inside, shape and subscribe to the spiritual domain of the nation. Of course he did not begin with the nation, but a faint notion, that gradually found around it the half whispers of the infinitely helpless, infinitely suffering common people of the land. His task was to make them audible, confident and self reliant, to consolidate them into a discipline that with the aid of cultural diversity, marches towards the same goal, like so many feet in a procession. The more he saw, the more grew the acquaintance, to result into a literature that parallel to the active politics in the outer world, got engaged in both constructing the individual and collective unconscious and lifting it to the level of an awakened sense of unity and uniformity, where the nation is truly born. But before that what was required was self preparation. Tagore in this phase was gathering various experiences of man, nature and their mysterious, mutual co-existence, suppressed equally under the shadow of an overwhelming sorrow and agony, that in the political interpretation may pass for a symbol of British colonial and imperial hegemony. Indeed, it had been the British ruling policy of dual Govt. and permanent settlement and many other similar pretexts of economic exploitation like forceful indigo plantation, destruction of hand crafts and looms where Muslin had been produced, which robbed the peasants of Bengal of their fortune, peace and by extreme physical torture even their resistance capacity. It is these unfortunate, broken-hearted, helpless creatures whom Tagore meets in his estate. In one of his letter, he writes:

What a store of water must have been laid up in the sky this year. The river has already risen over the low char-lands [Sand-banks by the deposit of a river], threatening to overwhelm all the standing crops. The wretched *rayts*, in despair, are cutting and bringing away in boats sheaves of half-ripe rice. As they pass my boat, I hear them bewailing their fate. It is easy to understand how heart-rending it must be for cultivators to have cut down their rice on the very eve of its ripening, the only hope left them being that some of the ears may possibly have hardened into grain.

There must be some element of pity in the dispensations of Providence, else how did we get our share of it? But it is so difficult to see where it comes in. The lamentations of these hundreds of thousands of unoffending creatures do not seem to get anywhere. The rain pours on as it lists, the river still rises, and no

amount of petitioning seems to have the effect of bringing relief from any quarter.²⁴

That petition hardly works, Tagore had been well aware of, but what he witnessed before his eyes day in and day out, inspired him to lay hands upon some social activities and curative measures within his capacity, to redress these helpless people. In another of his letters, collected in the same book, *The Glimpses of Bengal*, he writes:

I feel a great tenderness for these peasant folk- our rayts-, big, helpless, infantile children of Providence, who must have food brought to their very lips, or they are undone. When the breasts of Mother Earth dry up they are at a loss what to do, and can only cry. But no sooner is their hunger satisfied than they forget all their past sufferings.²⁵

It is regarding them that he must have thought when he wrote his famous poem *Ebar Firaon More* (Turn Me Back Now):

They stand there! Head down, stolid and silent. Lined faces carry the sad, tragic chronicles of centuries. Whatever burden comes upon shoulder, they never protest but bear it till body permits; then, pass it to children and generations. They never rage at fate, neither scold God, nor accuse man. Evening comes and just a few grains suffice their animal need. When that too is denied and in addition, crude power stands aloft, red-eyed and impudent to strangle every sense of humanity, still they obey, unaware how and where to beg justice. A hushed appeal releases half way, salutes the Poor's God; a sigh drops; - they die; unmourned and uncounted.²⁶

A letter of the same period (11th may, 1893) once again takes up the issue:

There is another pleasure for me here. Some times one or other of our simple, devoted old ryots comes to see me- and their worshipful homage is so unaffected! How much greater than I are they in the beautiful simplicity and sincerity of their reverence. What if I am unworthy of their veneration- their feeling loses nothing of its value.

I regard these grown up children with the same kind of affection that I have for little children- but there is also a difference. They are more infantile still. Little children will grow up later on, but these big children never.

A meek and radiantly simple soul shines through their worn and wrinkled old bodies. Little children are merely simple, they have not the unquestioning, unwavering devotion of these. If there be any undercurrent along which the soul of men may have communication with one another, then my sincere blessing will surely reach and serve them.²⁷

Indeed, Tagore's deep concern reached them and did some good. His efforts in village construction, penned in the essay *Swadeshi Samaj* and recorded more elaborately in Elmhirst's book, ' The Poet and The Plowman', will be discussed at proper places. But the Shelidaha years, as a prologue to those mature works of Swadeshi period, already drives the point home that it is never

so easy to do some good for others. Tagore recounts his amazement in a number of instances during this period:

....One day a fire broke out in a village nearby. The people were so utterly dazed that they could do nothing. Then the men from a neighbouring Muslim village came rushing and fought the fire. There was no water and thatched roofs had to be pulled down to stifle flames. You have to use force in order to do good! And they came to me saying, 'what luck that our roofs were dismantled- that is how we have been saved'. They were happy that the beating benefited them; but I was filled with shame by their submissiveness...

In my estate, the river was far away and lack of water was a serious problem. I said to my tenants, 'If you dig a well, I shall get it cemented'. They replied, 'you want to fry fish in the oil of the fish itself! If we dig the well you shall go to heaven through the accumulated virtue of having provided water for the thirsty, while we shall have done the work'. The idea obviously, was that an account of all such deeds was kept in heaven and while I, having earned great merit, could go to the seventh heaven, the village people would simply get some water. I had to withdraw my proposal...

I had built a road from our estate office up to Kushtia. I told the villagers who lived close to the road, 'The upkeep of this road is your responsibility. You can easily get together and repair the ruts'. It was, in fact, their ox-cart wheels that damaged the road and put it out of use during the rains. They replied, 'Must we look after the road so that gentlefolk from Kolkata can come and go with ease?' They could not bear the thought that others should also enjoy the fruits of their labour. Rather than let that happen, they would put up with inconveniences.²⁸

But his amazement turns into a heart-felt pity, when he analyses their psychology and realizes the reason of their helplessness:

The poor in our villages have borne many insults; the powerful have done many wrongs. On the other hand, the powerful have to do all the welfare work. Caught between tyranny and charity, the village people have been emptied of self respect. They ascribe their miseries to sins committed in previous births, and believe that, to have a better life, they must be reborn with a greater fund of merit. The conviction that there is no escape from suffering makes them helpless.²⁹

No one else in his times, had been willing to think of these helpless people, much less to work for them. But Tagore made his strategy. He realized that a healthy state of society could never be reached where the individual had lost his initiative and confidence and looked up for assistance from others in matters where he could help and guide himself best. Help from outside would keep them 'big, helpless children' for ever. Hence his rural community development programme concentrated on the twin principles of self help and enlightenment. From the former emerges Tagore, the nationalist, from the latter, Tagore, the educationist, and both of them contributed jointly, immensely to keep the spiritual domain of the nation vibrant and independent.

Unlike the political leaders, preoccupied with begging and petitioning for some trifling political benefits, advantageous mostly for their own upper class interest,- Tagore realized it early that the peasants rooted in the soil of the country, represent the core of Indian society and economy. Until and unless change comes there, the nation will not move one step forward. That is why he repeatedly rebelled against the colonizer's education policy that intentionally keeps the gap wide and alive. As a nationalist educationist his plea had been to bridge the gap adequately, the sooner, the better. 'The soil, in which we are born', he reminded his age again and again,

...is the soil of our village, the mother earth in whose lap we receive our nourishment from day to day. Our educated elite, abstracted from this primal basis, wander about in the high heaven of ideas like aimless clouds, far removed from this our home. If this cloud does not dissolve into a shower of loving service, man's relation with mother-earth will never become truly meaningful. If all our ethereal ideas float about in vaporous inanity, the seed time of the new age will have come in vain. It is not as if there is no rain but the land remains untilled. It is as if from our vast country, stretched like an arid waste, a thirsty cry goes forth heavenward: All your accumulated ideas, your wealth of knowledge arrayed in fine splendour-all this should be mine. Give to me all that is mine. Prepare me so that I may receive it all. Whatever you give will be restored to you a thousand-fold.³⁰

The spiritual domain of nationalism required words first, then works. Still as a man, if not as a poet, 'Tagore's chief concern for fifty years, from 1890 to his death, was the welfare and upbringing of Indian peasant'.³¹ with his limited resource and in the limited field where he could function, first in his family estates and later in Sriniketan, he helped and made it possible for the peasants to build their own schools and hospitals, roads and water tanks, set-up co-operative enterprises and banks and a system of self government, thus saving them from the exertions of 'usurious money lenders and petty lawyers who would fatten on false litigation'.³² the good amount which he was awarded with the Noble Prize in 1913, he donated to his school in Shantiniketan and invested in the agricultural co-operative bank, he had earlier set-up in Patisar. The bank ultimately failed and the money was lost. But he never rued for his decision. A letter written to Abala Bose, wife of the scientist Sir J.C. Bose, records the success of his enterprise:

...arrangement has been made so that the villagers should be able to undertake welfare measures themselves by repairing roads, removing the dearth of water, settling their disputes by arbitration, establishing schools, clearing jungles, providing against famines by setting up Dharma-Golas (grain bank) etc. and in every way to contribute their own share in the welfare of the village to which they belong.³³

That these were no idle words can be easily confirmed by the report of the officer in charge of the Rajshahi District, recorded in the District Gazetteer (1916) in the following words:

A very favourable example of estate government is shown in the property of the poet, Sir Rabindranath Tagore. The proprietors brook no rivals. Sub-infeudation within the estate is forbidden raiyats are not allowed to sub-let on pain of ejectment. There are three divisions of the estate, each under a sub-manager with a staff of tahasildars, whose accounts are strictly supervised. Half of the Dakhilas are checked by an officer of the head office. Employees are expected to deal fairly with the raiyats and unpopularity earns dismissal. Registration of transfer is granted on a fixed fee, but is refused in the case of an undesirable transferee. Remissions of rent are granted when inability to pay is proved. In 1312 it is said that the amount remitted was Rs. 57,595. There are Lower primary Schools in each division and in Patisar, the centre of the management, there is a High English School with 250 students and a charitable dispensary. These are maintained out of a fund to which the estate contributes annually grant of Rs. 1250 and the raiyats 6 pies to rupee in their rent. There is an annual grant of Rs. 240 for the relief of the cripples and the blind. An agricultural bank advances loans to raiyats at 12 percent per annum. The depositors are chiefly Calcutta friends of the poet, who get interest at 7 percent. The bank has invested about Rs. 90,000 in loans.³⁴

Tagore was never made the Congress president, he never led any political movement³⁵ delivering burning words to the people and then watery prayers to the Government, but as Milton said, 'they also serve' who engage in these thousand nameless activities, add strength to the backbone of the nation and try their utmost to protect the honour of the mother while her gallant sons in the political field, copy from the Western political models and stoop down to every sort of compromise. Unlike them, Tagore never lectured from afar, he came down 'where live the poorest, and lowliest and lost'³⁶ and relied on the power of light. He believed that human heart, however stupefied in darkness, can still catch the fire, once the light of education sparks in it. For Education meant, as another heroic leader of the spiritual domain, Swami Vivekananda defined it, was nothing but 'the manifestation of the perfection already in man'. What these trodden and pressed rustic mass required, was a spark and a little initial help to set the wheel into motion. Then it by itself could gather the speed and force, necessary to break all shackles of dependence, spiritual and political. Of course Tagore stood by Swamiji when he said,

...the poor fellows work hard from morning to sunset, and some body else takes the bread out of their hands, and their children go hungry...They must have a better piece of bread and a better piece of rag on their bodies...my plans are...to reach these masses of India. Suppose you start schools all over India for the poor, still you cannot educate them. How can you? The boys of four years would better go to the plough or to work, than to your school...Why should not

education go from door to door, say I. If a ploughman's boy cannot come to education why not meet him at the plough, at the factory, just wherever he is?³⁷....India is to be raised, the poor are to be fed, education is to spread, and the evil of priestcraft is to be removed. No priestcraft, no social tyranny! More bread, more opportunity for everybody!³⁸...We want that energy, that love of independence, that spirit of self reliance, that immovable fortitude, that dexterity in action, that bond of unity of purpose, that thirst for improvement. Checking a little the constant looking back to the past, we want that expansive vision infinitely projected forward; and we want- that intense spirit of activity which will flow through our every vein, from head to foot.³⁹

Like Swamiji, Tagore also had the anchor of his faith in humanity. Such deep-rooted it was in him that critics have opined that 'Tagore believed in God because he believed in man and not vice-versa'.⁴⁰

All this time while he came to know and stood by the rayots of his estate, the artist in him did not sit idle but kept on watching every detail of the flow of common life, its joy and sorrow, love and enmity, little deeds of endurance and sacrifice and profound submission before injustice and oppression. He himself wrote in one of his poems:

Whoever wishes to,
May sit in meditation
With eyes closed
To know if the world be true or false.
I, meanwhile
Shall sit with hungry eyes,
To see the world
While the light lasts.⁴¹

Vision leads to meditation and from there to the philosophy of life. In one of his letters he describes how he feels wearied and dejected one evening and closing down his book on aesthetics, he blows out the lamp with a desire to retire to bed:

The moon light just then peeps through the open windows. Looking out at the sky flooded with light, he wonders how a little, man-made lamp can succeed in shutting out all this beauty. 'What I had been looking for in the empty wordiness of the book? There was the very thing itself, filling the skies, silently waiting for me outside, all these hours!' he is just amused at the irony of man's fate seeking the eternal, himself tied to the ephemeral. 'The very spot on which the moon light falls is my landed property, but the moon light tells me that my ownership is an illusion and my landed estate tells me that this moon light is all emptiness. And as for poor me, I remain distracted between the two.'⁴²

Little does he know it then, that years afterwards, he will be able to overcome this distraction, having his preference fixed for the vast broad humanity in place of the territorial limitation of his own nation and its narrow nationalism.

For the time being the struggle continues. In a letter dated 28th March, 1894, he writes:

I am overwhelmed by this awareness of the baffling mystery within me which I can neither understand nor control. I know not where it will take me or I it, I know not what I can do or cannot do. I cannot see, nor am I consulted about, what surges up in my heart, what flows in my veins, what stirs in my brain, and yet I move about and keep up the pretence that I am the master of my thoughts and deeds. I am like a living pianoforte with a complicated network of wires hidden within it, but what makes it play and who comes suddenly to play on it and when and why, I do not know. I can only know what is being played at the moment, whether the keys are struck in joy or in sorrow, whether the notes are sharp or flat, high-pitched or low, whether the music is in tune or out of tune, - but wait, do I really know even that? ⁴³

It is that Providence, that life long companion, Jiban Debata, who has seated at the helm of his boat and is steering it, this time to the faint smiles and big drops of tears, rising and falling like endless waves, in the complex labyrinth of life in rural Bengal. Out of this contact emerge *Manasi* (Of the Mind, 1890), *Sonar Tori* (The Golden Boat, 1894) and the short stories.

In a letter to one of his friends Rabindranath tried to answer the query as to who was the object of his love poems in *Manasi*:

Man's cravings are unlimited, his capacity and reach very limited, and so he builds up in his mind an image of his desires which he can adore. The beloved in *Manasi* poems is of the mind only. It is my first, tentative, incomplete image of God. Will I ever be able to complete it? ⁴⁴

Manasi is no particular woman of this earth, but one who resides in the mind only. Seeking her, results into not possession, but evermore unrest and further seeking only. In one of his poems, the poet asks:

Who will make me mad once again? This heart, cold, indifferent and virtuous, is become like a stone. Whose eyes will make the fountain flow out of this very rock? But what happens when such a one comes? I come near, I hold her hands, I crush her against my heart, wanting to suck all her loveliness into me, to loot with my kisses the smiles on her lips, to trap her glances for ever into my eyes. No, It's all a vain chasing, a grabbing of emptiness, like straining the blue of the sky. The body is there in the arms, the beauty flees, the weariness remains. At dawn I return home, weary and shamefaced. What is of the mind, - how can it be found in the body? ⁴⁵

The quest continues in the next volume and this time, the poet does find the golden boat, his long cherished dream. But the boatman, he dimly recognizes. The boat collects all his harvest, then sails away, leaving him behind, forlorn. Obviously, the poet's search has still not met his target. But what is important for him, is that he has not left the chase:

I clasp your hands, and my heart plunges into

The dark of your eyes, seeking you whoever

Evade me behind words and silence.⁴⁶

Now in the world of the short stories, at last, the voyage seems to reach its long sought resting island, the voyager disembarks on the Ghat, the bank and the bathing steps on the river, which finally confides to him its hushed secret, preserved affectionately in its own spiritual domain, where the external bustle and hurry could not interfere. The Ghat speaks and recalls how a charming little girl used to come to the river. So sweet she seemed that

When her little shadow fell on the water, I wanted to hold on it for ever. If only I could have bound it to my stones!...When she trod on my stones, her four fold anklets tinkling, my clumps of moss and weeds seemed to tremble in delight. It was not as if Kusum played or chatted to excess, or laughed or joked very much: yet the strange thing was that she had more companions than any one else. Even the naughtiest girls could not do without her. Some called her Kusi, some Khusi or joy, some Rakshusi or Demoness. Her mother called her Kusmi. Every now and then I would see Kusum sitting by the water's edge. There was a strange affinity between her heart and the water. She loved the water.⁴⁷

Days passed. Kusum returned to her village, a young and lovely woman, but a widow. Some more years elapsed. One day a tall, fair and handsome Sanyasi arrived in the village and took shelter in the Shiva temple near the ghat. Kusum fell in silent love with him, who in all probability had been her disappeared and supposed to be dead husband. The Sanyasi, anxious for her long absence, once caught her on the steps, - it was a full moon night,- and at his cross examination she confessed that she had had a wicked dream in which she found the Sanyasi making love to her. The Sanyasi was stunned. He begged of Kusum to forget him and disappeared once again. Kusum slowly came down to the steps, stood looking at the water:

From her earliest youth, she lived beside these waters; now that she was weary, if the water were not to reach out to draw her to its lap, who else would do so? The moon set, the night passed into deep darkness. I heard a splash: I could make out nothing else. The wind rose and fell in the darkness; it seemed as though it wanted to blow out the stars for fear that the least thing would be visible. She who used to play on my lap ended her sport that day and moved away, I could not learn where.⁴⁸

Tagore, at last, seems to have found out his real strength, that is, depiction of a mood, creation of an atmosphere or sudden unexpected turn in the flow of a character or plot that in all resemblance had an affinity with the innate lyrical impulse within him. The swift and intuitive grasp of a situation now begins to respond to each and every impression or suggestion received from the outside and in a characteristic prose, flowing like the river itself, registers the imprints of imagination in story after stories.

In one, entitled *The Post Master*, the central figure is not the Post master but Ratan, an orphan girl who had no one to call her own, and so worked as his maid-cum-cook. He would tell her stories and yearns of the big city, he had been missing so much, and also taught her to read and write. She, in her turn, would cook and clean for her master, fetch his water (which he would persist in storing in pitchers for his bath as people do in Calcutta, rather than risking a dip in the village pond), arrange his hookah and waited whole day, all expectant, for the evening hours. To him, however, she had been a pastime.

When Malaria made the Post Master bed-ridden, the little girl had her constant vigil at the bed side and nursed him back to health. She got her prize for that. The Post Master resigned from his post and prepared to leave for Calcutta. Ratan's innocent plea to take her with him was cast aside to the airs. Instead, at the departing moment, the Post Master offered her some money. But the little girl refused, cried and ran out of the sight. The boat left and looking at the whirlpool of the river, the Post Master had been musing on the mystery of life, its meetings and partings. The rain –swollen river struck him as tears flowing up from Mother Earth. He felt as if a boundless sorrow had pierced his heart and overwhelmed him with a vague, all pervasive grief. The face of an insignificant village girl hovered in his mind.

But no such philosophy arose in Ratan's heart. She kept alive a faint hope that the Post Master will return:

Alas for the foolish human heart! It cannot avoid making such blunders. Logic is slow to penetrate it. It distrusts proof, however absolute, clutches at false consolations, until they sever all its arteries and suck its life-blood. Only then, finally, does the mind become aware of its errors, but the heart continues eagerly to fall into further nets of entanglement.⁴⁹

Ratan's despair, indeed was the despair the nation had been striving to come out of, in its spiritual domain, and Tagore knew that it had a long distance to cross, before reaching the point. It had the imminent task of achieving a self confidence and faith, with which to fight the gathering clouds. Individual enlightenment was not enough; the requirement was a mass rising. Anything short of that was destined to end in an inevitable tragedy, as was Shasibhusan's struggle in *Megh O Raudra* (The cloud and the Sun).

In *Megh O Raudra*, Ratan's counterpart is Giribala. The letter of July 1891, which offers her source, also records her tragic crisis:

One girl in particular attracts my attention. She must be about eleven or twelve, but being well-built and buxom, she might pass for fourteen or fifteen. She has an attractive face,- very dark, but very handsome. Her hair cut short like a boy's seems to suit her face which beams with intelligence and a frank simplicity. She has a child in her arms and is looking at me with unabashed curiosity,- not a dull, stupid stare but lively and straightforward. Her utter lack of self consciousness and her half boyish, half girlish manner, confident and yet full of feminine grace,

is singularly charming. I did not know we had such types among our village women. Her people had come to see her off and were waiting for the boat to take her to her husband's home. So young and lively and yet already burdened with a child and with household cares! How does she react to her mother-in-laws nagging and to the self-complacence of a Hindu husband who takes his wife's devotion for granted?⁵⁰

In fact, early marriage and widowhood had been the fate of not woman of one story only. The issue, in its variegated forms, supplied Tagore a number of plots for his stories and he kept on describing the struggles of Subha (*Subha*) and Nirupama (*Dena-Paona*, Debt and Dowry) and Bindu and Mrinal (*Strir Patra*, The Wife's Letter) and Kadambini and so on. The authors favour and support mostly go for these women characters, weak and unfortunate, and the children; Phatik of the story Chhuti (Leave) being the leader of them. The male adults, especially from urban background, in contrast appear priggish, wicked, ridiculous and contemptible,⁵¹ with a good dose of irony granted for them. Besides Sashibhusan, the only probable exception may be the Kabuliwala, a rough Afghan and not a Bengali.

Sashibhusan had been a Bengali, but only in name. In his idealism and his chase after it, he resembled the Arab Beduin, Tagore much admired in his forming years. When Giribala's father settled her marriage elsewhere and made it impossible for him to stay any more in the village, Sashi took the boat and sailed for the city. On the river a tragedy occurred. A native boat was competing with a foreign steamer. When it overtook the steamer with the help of its full sail, the young English manager fired his gun at the sail just playfully and the boat sunk. Sashi from his boat saw everything, saved the drowned boatmen, except one, and was furious. He could not resist himself from protesting such cruel and despotic behaviour of the colonial rulers. But the steamer disappeared fast and he could not do anything. He requested the boatmen to complain to the police. He did not agree. The passengers of the steamer also denied to witness, they said they had seen nothing, nor heard anything. Sashi himself complained and bore the cost of the law case. The manager acknowledged that he had fired, but he said his intention was to kill birds. And the case was dismissed there.

A second incident followed the first within one year. Sashi was again on the boat, bound for Calcutta. This time a magistrate was passing on a boat which did not listen to the alarms of the fisher men but moved over the fishing nets in the river. Its helm was caught in the net. The sahib ordered to cut and destroy the costly net and catch the fisher men. His guards could not find them as they all flew away in fear. He produced some three or four innocent persons who did not know anything and began to cry and plea to the sahib for release. The magistrate, however, did not care their plea and was about to order his guards to arrest them and to send to prison. But Sashi appeared before him and charged for his illegal action and orders. The magistrate used some abusive words, and Sashi pounced over him and bet him black and blue and all colours.

In the court no body said anything in favour of Sashi. The fisher men, whose costly fishing nets had been destroyed by the magistrate, said that he did not pass any such order, and only called them to his boat to ask about their names and address. Some other villagers who had been known to Sashi and were present on the spot at that time, witnessed with full enthusiasm that Sashi himself without any provocation from the Magistrate or his guards, attacked and wounded them, before their own eyes. Sashi again protested such dry lie, but obviously, was sent to prison.

This time, however, Sashi did not protest and went happily behind the bars, with the words:

I prefer the jail. The iron chains do not tell lies. The freedom that prevails outside deceives me and endangers my life. And if you speak of good association, the number of ungrateful and lying cowards in prison is small, for the place itself is small, but in the world outside their number is countless.⁵²

Against the countless cowards, one Sashibhusan could not win the battle, but it could not stop him or his creator as well from the battle. While his calculative comrades were striving after their own, narrow, interests in the external political sphere, one Sashi in the spiritual domain was enough to dismiss the gathering clouds. The nation and Mother India required a few such daring sons and daughters instead of the tottering plenty, worthless even to themselves.

Tagore never ventured in writing patriotic stories; even Sashibhusan does not belong to the category of a heroic patriot. His author was pleased to make him just self-reliant and self-helping. Of course, he hated foreign rule and Mother India's suffering under bondage. But he also believed that, 'as a sick body easily falls prey to outside infection, so a society where the individual has lost all confidence and backbone and does like to take any initiative in any field, that society must invite foreign exploitation. No people can be exploited for long who are themselves conscious of their rights and willing to die in their defense. Tagore, therefore, was more concerned with rousing 'in his people a sense of dignity',⁵³ than with finding fault with others or begging freedom with cries and tears. Thus he contributed in shaping resistance in his characters who make and represent the body of the nation.

It is true that resistance does not work alike in everybody, not even in Tagore's works, but this in fact, enriches his art, rather than making it a defect. It has enabled him to present the working mass in their varied forms and colours, as they had been in real life; in other words, it has saved his art from turning into propaganda. The people and their fate suffer sudden change, their aim varies, their path bifurcates itself at crucial points, leading to doubt and conflict, but ultimately, none of them yield, a sense of tragic greatness hovers round them and make them lovable. In fact, in one of his letters to his niece, Tagore wonders at this puzzle of life:

So vast and varied is the mind of man, so many its hungers and so varied its claims that it must now and again swerve and reel and toss. This indeed is what makes man human, the proof that he lives, the refutation that he is not a mere bundle of matter. He who has never felt this weakness, who has never wavered on the brink, whose mind is narrow and strait, such a man is not truly alive. What we call instinct, what we always refer to disparagingly in our daily life, - this it is that leads us out of the jungle of virtue and vices, our elations and afflictions, into an awareness of the ultimate possibility of our destiny. One who has never known the turbulence of life, in whom the petals of the mysterious flower within have never opened, such a one may seem happy, may seem a saint, his single-track mind may impress the multitude with its power, but he is ill-equipped for the life's true adventure into the infinite.⁵⁴

Obviously Tagore was no longer in search of the single track of the mind, but its manifold variations and multiple tunes, which were to raise the symphony in the spiritual domain of the nation. His familiarity with the walking multitude, which makes the nation, was nearing completion. And like his own Ratan in the story Post Master, he had been waiting expectant, for the rise of the curtain to peep into the new horizon, his Jiban Debata was leading him unto.

Notes

1. Rabindranath Tagore Manuscript Collection, Ms. Accession no. 344(J), in English, p. 5. (Rabindra Bharati Archive, RBA). Also qtd. in Rabindranath Tagore: My Life in My Words, ed. Uma Das Gupta, Penguin Viking, New Delhi, 2006, p. 52.
2. Tagore. Rabindranath, 2nd Letter from Europe, Europe Prabasir Patra, pp. 17-20, translated by Uma Das Gupta, 2006, p.55
3. Kripalani. Krishna, Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography, UBSPD, New Delhi, reprint 2008, p. 78-9.
4. Ibid, p. 80.
5. Rachanabali, vol- x, pp. 473, translated and qtd. by Poddar in 'Tagore: The Political Personality', 2004, p. 42.
6. Poddar, 2004, p. 25.
7. Kripalani, reprint 2008, p. 83.
8. Ibid, p. 85.
9. Promotho Bishi, Rabindra Sarani (The Rabindra Way) in Bengali, Mitra Ghosh, Kolkata, 1961, pp. 7 and 15, my translation.
10. Kripalani, reprint 2008, p. 95.
11. Ibid, p. 95.
12. Qtd. in Kripalani, reprint 2008, p.98
13. Letters to a Friend, p. 24. qtd in My Life in My words, pp. 83-4.
14. Qtd. in Kripalani, reprint 2008, p. 122.
15. My Reminiscence, Sharps and Flats, Rupa, 2008, p. 256.

16. Ibid, p. 254.
17. Ibid, pp. 256-7.
18. Ibid, pp.258-9.
19. Kripalani, reprint 2008, p. 144.
20. This was the head quarter of the Zamindari, which included also Patisar and Sajadpur.
21. An Address to Village Workers, 1919, Palli-Prakriti, reprint, Calcutta-Visva-Bharati, 1962, pp.98-9, translated and qtd. by Uma Das Gupta in Rabindranath Tagore: My Life in My Words, Penguin, Delhi, 2006, p. 99.
22. Qtd. in Chatterjee Partha, The Nation and Its Fragments, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 4.
23. Nationalist Movement in India-A Reader, ed. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, OUP, New Delhi: 2009, p.5.
24. Qtd. from Tagore's The Glimpses of Bengal, in My Life in My Words, pp. 107-8.
25. Ibid, p. 105.
26. Translation mine, after a look at a similar attempt, by Poddar in his book, 2004, p. 61.
27. The Glimpses of Bengal, London, Macmillan, 1921, pp.104-5.
28. 'City and Village', in Towards Universal Man, ed. Bhabani Bhattacharya, translated by various writers, Introduction by Humayun Kabir, Bombay: Asia publishing House, 1961, p. 318-20.
29. Ibid, p.320.
30. Kripalani, reprint 2008, pp. 161-2.
31. Ibid, p. 162.
32. Ibid, p. 162.
33. Ibid, p. 165.
34. Qtd. in Adhikari. Sachin, *Shilaidaha O Rabindranath* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1974, pp.221-2.
35. Of course, he led the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, and it will be discussed later, but then it was not a typical political movement as had been, for instance, the Non-co-operation movement or Quit India movement, it had its relevance and significance chiefly, in the spiritual domain of the nation.
36. Song Offerings(Gitanjali), No 10, the English writings of Rabindranath Tagore, ed. Sisir Kumar Das, Sahitya Academi, New Delhi, first published 1994, reprint 2004, vol. 1, p, 45.
37. Swami Vivekananda, Works: vol.8; pp. 85-90.
38. Ibid, vol. 4, p. 313.
39. Ibid, pp. 336-7.
40. Kripalani, reprint 2008, p. 164.
41. Qtd. in Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man, Bloomsbury, London, 1997, p. 108.
42. Kripalani, reprint 2008, p. 146.
43. Ibid, p. 175.
44. Ibid, p. 144.
45. Ibid, p. 138.
46. Nishphal Kamana, (Fruitless Desire), in Lover's Gift and Crossing, poem no. 25, Macmillan, London, 1918.
47. The Ghat's story, in *Selected short Stories: Rabindranath Tagore*, edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri, Oxford, New Delhi, 2002, p. 33.

48. Ibid, p. 39.
49. Qtd. in Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man, Bloomsbury, London, 1997, pp.117-8.
50. Kripalani, reprint 2008, pp. 171-2.
51. Ibid, p. 168.
52. Poddar, 2004, p. 62.
53. Kripalani, reprint 2008, p. 173
54. Ibid, p. 134.

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