Tagore: Transcending Post Colonial Attitudes

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Cultural identity remains a strong ground of resistance to the political/ commercial hegemony of forces ranged against pluralism. As part of this 'assertion' or 'resistance', culture is increasingly being defined through variegated parameters.

During the days of colonisation, culture was a potent symbol of protest as well as cooption. Post-colonial theory premises itself largely on what it perceives as *acculturation* arising out of a policy of *diffusion*—which aimed at the expansion of European culture throughout the colonies; as distinct from the *evolutionary* approach where parallel developments emerge out of interaction. Hoebel in Kopf (1969:4-5) defines acculturation as a 'process of interaction between two societies by which the culture of the society in subordinate position is drastically modified to conform to the culture of the dominant society'. A large section of scholars of post-colonialism view the Indian renaissance in this light. Irrespective of shades of left or right, such theorists are suspicious of the Orientalists who were the prime movers of the evolutionary approach.

From one point of view, the reconstruction of the past is construed as resistance to an alien political power; from a different point of view, it may involve perpetuation of an indigenous social order smothering inner currents of change—and thus an oppressive native corollary to foreign domination, guilty of fostering an unjust system. It may also be viewed as a subtle endeavour at sharing the loaves of office/patronage.

Others may be inclined to detect trends which are contrary to those mentioned above: viewing it as a capitulation to alien influence, jettisoning indigenous culture in the garb of reviving it, and so would label it as an accessory to acculturation in aid of the 'other'. To them, allegations of unjust oppressive forces existing within the indigenous structure are unfounded and subversive.

The Indian Renaissance has been seen in all these hues, and more. Many who suspect the motives of the orientalists, also tend to cast aspersions on the Indian thinkers of that period who had associated with them in an endeavour at social reform. For them this process is vitiated *ab initio*.

However, the Indian Renaissance does not yield itself to easy categorisation. The apparent contradictions in the formulations of many of the major protagonists were symbolic of their attempt to revitalise/modernise Indian society, as well as to resist the 'quicksand of modernisation'. The recurrent motifs in the ideas, say, of a Tagore, form a filligree in the intricate tapestry of: tradition/modernity; nationalism/globalism; physical/metaphysical; form/content; and language/metalanguage. As outlined in Raychaudhury (1999: 142):

> Central to the intellectual and moral concerns of that time was the attempt to grapple with the colonial experience. Self conscious emotional and intellectual exercises to work out a *modus vivendi* in a situation perceived to be humiliating generated other related efforts: evaluating the west, introspection into the strength and weaknesses of the Indian tradition and its true character and agenda for reconstructing Indian Society. The end results were of course not uniform, but there are identifiable regularities in the thought patterns of modern India's founding fathers.... Tagore's thinking on the themes mentioned above can be located squarely within the tradition of nineteenth century Bengali thought from Rammohan to the poet's contemporary, Vivekananda.

But as so often with 'orientalism', it is not the actual reality but the West's opinion that has largely created the conventional image of Tagore.

Today, many of the concepts formed in the last two centuries are under review (as in the hands of post colonial critics). It is even alleged by many, that most of these concepts were out of tune with the greater Indian reality, and betrayed the logic of history. But, may we remember: the problem of violent cultural identity draws on the interpretation/misinterpretation of the past; and that occasionally, the demonisation of ideas/individuals on premises drawn from a particular ideology accrues in the indirect legitimization of an ideology increasingly opposed to the demonizing ideology.

Before examining Tagore's *locus standi* vis-à-vis the various concepts of colonial transaction, I would, in a conscious and vain imitation of the *Nyāya* philosophers very briefly review post-colonial critique, with special reference to four central figures in the 'culture

of résistance: James Conolly; Frantz Fanon; Amilcar Cabral; and Edward Said.

II

Post colonialism has come to be accepted as a broad based thought process which contains in itself an amazing variety of experience. Despite assumptions to the contrary, it is also perceivable that there was no essential 'political disjunction' between anti–colonialism and post -colonialism to the extent that in many ways the latter was almost an extension of the former: This is maintained in Young (2001:2):

> This decentered anti–colonial network, not just a Black Atlantic, but a revolutionary, Black, Asian and Hispanic globalization with their own dynamic countermodernity, were constructed in order to fight global imperialism, in the process demonstrating for our times that 'globalization' does not necessarily involve irresistable totalization.

Most of the theories of postcolonial action originated in the West but they were modified by the experience of anti–colonial movement in three continents—Latin America, Africa and Asia. This 'tri–continental' experience resurfaced on the political territory of the West, manifesting itself in the challenge to Western institutions of power in May 1968. The challenge was aimed at the heart of Eurocentricism, disturbing the Ivy League universities with contrary assumptions of the self and society, aiming to 'undo the ideological heritage of colonialism not only in the decolonized countries, but also in the West itself'. Post colonialism still sees itself as having undertaken a task yet 'unfinished'. Overmuch suspicion tends to dilute and narrow the intensity. It is not simply the outcome of a novel/revolutionary concept of the intercourse of cultures, but a syllogistic evolution of an intellectual engagement: 'while culture as representation of experience, and cultural critique as challenge of its determinants, has always constituted a central preoccupation for anti and post–colonial theory, its emphasis on cultural issues is also the result of some unfinished business of anti–colonialism.' [Young (2001:65)]

Ironically, while engaging in 'acts of historical retrieval', in rejuvenating native culture and its symbols, indigenous intellectual traditions and histories of popular protest, post colonialism, at the same time, retains its suspicion of narratives which appear to it as elitist, even when based precisely on the themes mentioned above.

These narratives are supposed to harbour unholy ambitions—of silencing the authentic and hitherto unheard voice of the subaltern. This *ambiguous space* occasionally appears as a beguiling shadow ground: a resistance seems to lose its authenticity among revelations of hegemony and conspiracy, gender and caste bias, spiritual and the communal leanings, and so on. The perspective of post facto evaluation renders ever original voices defunct. However, the risk of a different kind of ideological hegemony or tyranny of taste, is also quite tangible and real. Tasting with a 'jaded palate' may cause things to lose their delicate savour. Overmuch suspicion tends to dilute the intensity and narrow the scope of analysis.

At the same time, it is incontestable that post colonial critique has also concerned itself with divergent issues within the broad framework of the interface of religion and culture in 'new nationalisms', with issues such as outlined in Young (2001:66): 'State violence; the contemporary polities of identity...of antiracism and liberal multiculturalism... and the often hidden histories of oppression of other indigenous minorities and nomadic peoples.'

The gradual replacement of the Anglophone analysis centred on historical, economic and political issues, significantly by the Francophone emphasis on the 'subjective realms', proved to be of germinal importance in this discousse. The cultural and psychological effects of colonialism experienced by the subject peoples, became the focus of study. But within these broad categories there are subtle variations. Violence as political action formed a crucial component of many of these outlines. And Algeria with its experience of the most appalling violence forms a focus for many analysts. Algerian colonialism almost becomes a separate category, with its violent apotheosis, described in Young (2001:276):

> The Algerian war constituted one of the most chilling, violent episodes in the entire history of anticolonial activism. Its hyper ventilating violence always formed part of the original policy of the FLN campaign and equally of the French response. The extent and degree of atrocities on both sides, carried out on men, women and children alike, makes sickening reading. Violence, in many ways, is too clean and cerebral a word, too surrounded with the dignity of philosophical conceptualization, to describe the raging sadistic and sickening butchery of what went on in Algeria.

French intellectuals were shocked at the brutality resorted to by their countrymen to repress a native struggle and a crisis erupted in the discourse of anti/post colonialism which continues to persist till this

day. Sartre advocated the use of violence by the Algerians. The gamut of the experiences of the Algerian war of independence, in a way, stradles the theoretical world of post colonialism. The dynamics of this violence—termed *Algeriance* by Helene Cixous—is mirrored in the writings of Fanon, Memmi, Bourdieu, Althusser, Lyotard, Derrida and Cixous herself, all of them scarred, having spent part of their lives in violence ridden, fear driven Algeria.

Being a settler colony of the French, Algeria became a territory of exploitation, of a degree wherein the natives were sought to be systematically prevented from even the semblance of participation in the political economic system. Under the *code de l' indigénat* of 1881, Algerians had to renounce Islam and convert to Christianity to become eligible for citizenship of the occupying country, and gain limited access to a modicum of civil rights and right of franchise. Cases of such stipulated conversion were rare, and the strangled native voices tended to fined expression against the policy of *assimilation* in violence as articulated by Fanon.

Fanon and his 'Bible of Decolonization'

The high priest of violent struggle, Fanon agreed with Sartre and Memmi that violence degrades the victim as well as the perpetrator, but justified it on the premise that violence provided both 'political advantage and self respect'. His glorification of the young terrorists and their acts of sabotage, conflates with his denial of non-violence as a path of struggle for the 'people', as only a westernized elite was suited to practice it; and his representation of 'national consciousness' as a mere 'pitfall'. Categorisation of decolonisation as being 'always a violent phenomenon', flows from his overarching description of the nature of colonization outlined in Fanon (1966: 48): '...colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning facilities. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence.'

Inexplicably, ideas generated by (perhaps understandable) conditions in a particular region, transformed themselves into a form of universal doctrine of anti-colonialism backed by the philosophical prestige of individuals like Sartre. But, notwithstanding Sartre's suggestion that 'reform is a matter for the Algerians themselves after independence', is there any lesson for us in the subsequent corruption of the FLN regime that set in independent Algeria?

Cabral and Culture

Amilcar Cabral, unlike Fanon, understood the untranslatability of local ideas which were specific to certain conditions. This realisation of his in Guinea–Bissau under the Portuguese, led to the understanding: 'The still living culture of a people, which had proved a prime instrument of resistance throughout colonial history now forms an instrinsic part of the liberation movement.' (Young 200: 285) However, Cabral is deeply suspicious of the colonialist project of construction/reconstruction of the history and culture of the colonized nation:

> The practice of imperialist rule...demanded (and still demands) a more or less accurate knowledge of the society it rules and of the historical reality (both economic, social and cultural) in the middle of which it exists. This knowledge is necessarily expressed in term of comparison with the dominating subject and with its own historical reality. Such a knowledge is a vital necessity in the practice of imperialist rule. (1973: 58)

Echoes of this view can be heard in later critics like Vishwanathan. For Cabral, the necessity of such a project testified to the cultural resilience of 'people'. Cultural renaissance, in his opinion, became a necessity only for the subject elite, not so much for the masses who have preserved their tradition:

> It is also the result of this effectiveness of cultural resistance of the people, who when they are subjected to political domination and economic exploitation find that their own culture acts as bulwark in preserving their identity. (*Ibid.*: 61)

Political liberation does not create a cultural identity; rather it is created by the resilient culture of the native masses.

Looking back into these variegated strands of anti-colonialism in recent history, one can conclude that the inclination for aggressive action vis-à-vis an atrocious political situation virtually forced hardness upon the revolutionaries. They seem to be caught perforce in this trap of heartless cruelty and violence. Sensitive individuals as they were, they surely would have felt nostalgic for a more humane struggle. As Brecht had, in his characteristic way said in a slightly different context:

> "We who wanted to prepare the ground for kindness could not be kind ourselves."

Connolly's Idealism and the Irish Uprising

The schism in the soul is illustrated poignantly in James Connolly: desiring a parliamentary/democratic path to a socialist, free Irish state, desperate that the erstwhile originator of democracies was not willing to stop acculturation or grant self-rule to its colony. Ireland was in many ways an emotive issue for England and ever since Cromwell, blood had been spilt to subjugate a land which England felt was rightfully hers, although the Celtic tradition would not submit to indoctrination. Connolly, in his attitude to violence, Fanon, unlike his co-traveller across time, is ambivalent towards the cult of the bomb. In parenthesis, one recalls Tagore's visceral opposition to violent assertion, upon which we shall shortly dilate. Coming back to Connolly, unlike Fanon, he did not believe that violence was universal, nor did he subscribe to the theory that it was an 'existential form of colonial experience'.

His support of the rebellion of 1916 surprised and saddened many of his contemporaries. The uprising failed, and the dismay of some of his compatriots at the bloodshed is reflected in Yeats' 'Easter 1916': 'A terrible beauty is born'.

Perhaps the cultural tradition that Connolly was able to summon to enable him unlike Fanon, to retain a historicised/pragmatic view towards violent assertion shorn of all external glorification. He wrote in 1899:

> Our position towards [physical force] is that use or non-use of force for the realization of the ideas in progress always has been and always will be determined by the attitude, not of the party of progress but the governing class opposed to that party... [if that party is consistently violent]... then, but not till then, the party which represents the revolutionary idea is justified in ... using the weapons of force to dislodge the usurping class or government in possession. Connolly (1988: 208)

However in 1915 Connolly acknowledged in a different view:

> ... 'those who live by the sword shall perish by the sword' say the scriptures, and it may well be that in the progress of events the working class of Ireland may be called upon to face the stern necessity of taking the sword (or rifle) against the class whose rule has brought upon them and upon the world the hellish horror of the present European war. (*Ibid*: 210-11)

The abortive attempt ended with cruel suppression, Connolly himself suffered a mortal gunshot wound, and even while he lay dying of gangrene, as a lesson to aspiring revolutionaries, the military

courtmartialled him on a hospital bed, took him on a stretcher to Kilmainham Jail (Dublin), tied him to a chair and shot him. The bitterness of anti-colonial struggle is reflected in his poem 'The Legacy: The Dying Socialist to his Son', these lines from which are given below:

> They held our lands, our bodies ruled, and strove to rule the mind and Hell itself could not surpass their evil to mankind –
> And all who strove for human rights to break their cursed yoke –
> The noblest of our race, my child, went down beneath their stroke. Connolly (*Ibid.* : 299)

Said, Orientalism, and its Protean Shades

From these activists/revolutionaries, we come to a major theoretician: 'The introduction of the idea that Colonialism operated not only as a form of military rule but also simultaneously as a discourse of domination was the achievement of Edward Said.' (Young 200: 383)

Said has commanded enormous academic influence among post colonial critics across the globe. But his generalisations are not necessarily universally applicable. There is merit in his presumption that the political identity of the scholars of the Orient is a prime determinant in their concepts—the scholar 'comes up against the orient as a European or American first as an individual second'. Early on in *Orientalism*, acknowledging beforehand what he terms a controversial statement, he nevertheless says: '... all academic knowledge about India and Egypt is somehow tinged and impressed with, vitiated by the gross political fact—and that is what I am saying in this study of Orientalism.' *Orientalism* is however, heavily influenced by the antagonistic relationship between Christianity and Islam. The Indian Orient he wrote, '...could be treated by Europe with such proprietary hauteur—never with the sense of danger reserved for Islam,' the proprietary hauteur however did not preclude the less than respectable status accorded to Sanskrit among the 'Oriental languages' to be rectified later by William Jones, whose 'interest in India came to him by way of his prior interest in and knowledge of Islam.' [Said (1995: 75)]

Subsequently, Said recorded a protest against the indiscriminate 'lumping' of orientalist writings and against bracketing them 'together as rotten and worthless imperialism' reminding his readers 'I never did that anyway. It is benighted to say that Orientalism is a conspiracy or to suggest that the West is evil.' [(Said 1995: 345)]

Moreover, the bearings of *Orientalism*, discussed by Said towards the close of his book, and elaborated in the 'Afterword' appended to the later editions, raise issues about the study of culture, which seem to presage a movement beyond the theoretical constraints which many of his co-brethren of Academia appear to labour with. Said's encomiums for the 'group of remarkable scholars and researchers led by Ranajit Guha' for rescuing 'the writing of Indian history from the domination of the nationalist elite' and for revolutionising historiography, obscure the fact that, these scholars are not only analysing the West's role in enslaving the mind of the East, they are, in a significant departure from Said, analysing the role of the nationalist elite in perpetuating an unequal system in their native culture and country. It is not only the Orientalist who is sought to be placed under scrutiny with the help of the tools provided by Said, but the Oriental himself. Whether the provider of such tools would subscribe to this wholesale usage, in view of the considerable distinction between specimens of oriental theory and of oriental situations, is another theoretical conundrum. This conundrum is further complicated by such assertions by Said as :

> Nor is there much similarity between what obtains among Western experts in Sinology and Indology and the fact that many professional scholars of Islam in Europe and the United State spend their lives studying the subject, yet still find the religion and culture impossible to like, much less admire. (1995: 345)

Said had buttressed his charge against Orientalism in the Middle East citing examples such as Taha Hussain. Hussain, presumably being overawed by the West and in his anxiety to identify with his 'betters' had defined Arab culture as being European not Eastern, to register 'the identity of the Egyptian cultural elite, of which he was so distinguished a member'. [Said (1995: 323)] It need hardly be said that there is no corresponding analogy of any distinguished Indian saying during the Indian Renaissance, that Indian culture was European and not Eastern.

Some questions raised by Said involve a transcending of prefabricated categories:

> How does one represent other culture? What is another culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or religion, or civilization) a useful one, or does it always get involved either in self-congratulation (when one discusses ones own) or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the "other")? (1995: 325)

It is possible to perceive the utter sincerity of the thinkers engaging with these issues in the Indian Renaissance. For them, the definitions of culture had as their touchstones, 'human freedom and knowledge'. Knowledge of the West, freedom from the West as well as from the shackles of the past, many of them forged previously within the East, were among their concerns. Said has decried 'donnish abstractions', and commented how the orientalism he talks about 'failed to identify with human experience, failed also to see it as human experience'.

The tradition of Tagore saw culture not as a strait jacket but as evolving. The core of his views was not encrusted by dogmatic accretions, and so not in need of being subjected to the temporal whims of the age. He and his ilk were hardly coopted into the imperial designs of those, whom some enlightened critics may perceive to be the spokesmen, their 'white masters'. Extensive physical travel was the basis of their knowledge of cultural practices. Views congealed in 'concrete human history and experience', may not be amenable to easy classification into arbitrary, ideological pigeon holes. Said may not find occasion to quarrel with many of Tagore's tradition, indeed he appreciates him greatly in his later work, *Culture and Imperialism.*

Tagore represents an 'independent critical consciousness' for both the Orient and Orientalism.

III

The three models of colonialism discussed above represent with some variations, three major archetypes: Europe colonising Africa; Europe colonising the Middle East; and a European nation embarked on mission of subjugating and assimilating a nation within Europe. All the three models have appeared to me as being inalienable from the general picture of colonialism—wherein men have been engaged in enslaving not only the lands but the minds of men. The different forms that anti-colonialism took in these models present and illuminating backdrop to an analysis of hegemony an resistance.

I have tried to present more than one perspective in the dominant trends in Post colonial theory itself. There is a predominance of dead jargon (wonder if jargon is ever alive) in intellectual discourse today. Tagore is often portrayed by critics as naive and hegemonic. It appears easy enough to do so. William Radice explains:

> Tagore's art is a vulnerable art. Nearly all his writing are vulnerable to criticism, philistinism or contempt, because of his willingness to wear his heart on his sleeve, to take on themes that other writers would find grandiose, sentimental or embarrassing, and his refusal to cloak his utterances in clearness, urbanity or double talk. (1994: 25)

His lectures in some of the greatest universities of the world survive the most exacting scrutiny. As E.P. Thomson, Marxist historian, and hard headed thinker, said in 1991, 'More than any other thinker of his time, Tagore had a clear conception of civil society, as something distinct from and of stronger and more personal texture than political or economic structures.' Thompson (1991: 14). There is a predominance of intuition over analysis in Tagore. He was forthright in putting forward non-conformist views on popular topics, and never shied away from the risk of opprobrium, which indeed was forthcoming in ample measure. A very tentative list of themes that have to be discussed in discussing Tagore's vision of India would be:

(a) India as a land that did not glorify geographical or political nationalism and chose instead to respect man's existential search for the highest ideals of truth;
(b) as a land that saw truth not as objective, scientific law, but as a state to be realised by man, a state of supreme renunciation, self effacement and compassion;
(c) as a land that would see the good and the beautiful in all cultures, be their nest, absorb them into one body;
(d) as a land that is human, liberal, not arrogant, intolerant, aggressive; that seeks an identity in relationship and not an identity in confrontation;
(e) a land that looked upon the Buddha, and the state of *Sanyās* as the highest ideal;
(f) a land critical of its weaknesses, follies, injustices of the past, willing to correct its social and religious aberrations and superstitions;
(g) a land that venerates the great beauties of ancient traditions but does not gather under its flag to fight, despise other traditions;
(h) as a land that did not set out on a quest for the permanence of small limited, finite identities but for a merger of the small in the infinite universal consciousness; and
(i) a land where a life–affirming, deeply ethical mysticism flourished celebrating the beautiful in the universe and in man.

There is neither space nor is it necessary here to contextually discuss his ideas in detail. That objective unfortunately, will have to be left to another, larger paper. My endeavour here is to place the yardsticks/ concerns of postcolonial analysis in the midst of the narrative (if you will)—rather than indulge in assertion.

Tagore and History

Tagore himself had lamented on the tendency of research scholars to ignore the fact that only the living past was interesting, and indulge in scholastic industry which would not make people any the wiser: 'I have often felt sad that so much human talent and industry should disappear in the publication of matter whose bones keep on rattling without forming for us an outline of the figure that once moved.' [Tagore (1935: 115)]

An essay written by him on Indian history, reflects his concern for 'living history'. The essay was originally written in Bengali—*Bharatavarsher Itihasher Dhara*, and read before an audience in 1912, arousing a storm of controversy. The significance of the exposition of the main historical movements of India, was appreciated by Jadunath Sarkar, who undertook to publish an English rendering in *Modern Review* in 1913. Tagore reviewed the comments generated and produced an English version, in the *Viswa Bharati Quarterly* in 1923. His mystical and analytical insights merge in his concern for healthy social interaction, both between nations, and between communities within nations. There is no dread of being swamped by any civilization with pretensions of superiority :

> We shall know for certain that just as it is futile mendicancy to covet the wealth of others in place of our own, so also to keep ourselves segregated and starved by refusing the gift which is the common heritage of man because it is brought to us by a foreign messenger, only make for utter destitution.
>
> Our western critics, whose own people, whenever confronted with non-western races in a close contact, never know any other solution of the problem but extermination or expulsion by physical force, and whose caste feeling against darker races is brutally aggressive and contemptuous, are ready to judge us with a sneering sense of superiority when comparing India's history with their own.... India's problem has been far more complex than that of the west, and I admit that our rigid system of social regulation has not solved it. For to bring order and peace at the cost of life is terribly wasteful, whether in the policy of government or of society.... I love India, not because I cultivate the idolatry of geography, not because I have had the chance to be born in

her soil, but because she has saved through tumultuous ages the living words that have issued from the illuminated consciousness of her great sons : *Satyam, Jnanam, Anantam Brahma, Brahma* is truth, *Brahma* is wisdom, *Brahma* is infinite; *Santam, Sivam, Advaitam*, peace is in *Brahma*, goodness is in *Brahma*, and the unity of all beings. [Tagore (1988 a : 42-46)]

Tagore's Shakuntala

Misunderstanding such passages has unfortunately now become common. There is neither religious fundamentalism nor social obscurantism in Tagore. This is an analysis of a complex social problem, without an overt revolutionary tenor. Subtle hints are held out. The subjection of the vision of an artist to an evaluation strictly within the ambit of social science, and that too with the help of its normative procedure, sometimes throws up strange results. Tagore had written on the legend of Shakuntala more than once. Analysing one of his expositions, Thapar (2004: 20) state : 'Nineteenth century nationalism in India is thought to have fostered a conservative attitude towards tradition, because to question it was a concession to western ideas.' During her own analysis of the various versions of the legend of Shakuntala recounted through the ages, she lamented how of all persons, Tagore was to be the one to have declared that the play moved from the gross to the moral union, and to have used in the process terms such as '*patana*' and '*patita*' in association with Shakuntala's actions. Tagore's reading of the legend, appeared to her as being influenced by the perspectives of Indian nationalism and also Orientalism, so that: 'In this reading the empowerment of a woman through the birth of her son, which was significant to the epic story, now becomes unimportant.' [Thapar (2004: 21)] Conceding the point Thapar makes about woman's empowerment through the birth of a male child (with all the resultant implications of gender prioritisation), she perhaps misses out on the entire concept of the metaphysical journey through ordeal.

This essay (written as per Thapar in 1907 in Bengali, the English version appeared in *Modern Review* in 1911), could be juxtaposed to an essay written by Tagore in circa 1918 while defending his novel *Ghaire Baire*. A relevant extract as in Tagore (1918: 221) might be interesting:

Unfortunately, in Bengali, the criticism of literature has resolved itself into a judgement of the proprieties which are necessary for orthodoxy... how far Shakuntala is the perfect Hindu woman and Dushyanta the perfect Hindu King—these are the questions seriously discussed in the name of literary

> criticism.... There are a crowd of heroines in Shakespeare's dramas ... [but] even the most fanatical Christian theologians desist from awarding marks, in order of merit, according to their degrees of Christianity.... If one must indulge in this absurd mania for classification, even in literature, then at least it should follow the line of human nature as much as possible, instead of being arranged on the wooden shelves of what is Hindu, and what is not.

Stereotyped Image

This example may be cited against a typical misinterpretation of Tagore. What he said of his own time, is relevant more than ever amidst the din set up by clamouring ideologies, holding out the sentence of relegation to secondary status: 'It is sad to see wisdom struggling to seem clever, a prophet arrayed in caps and bells before an admiring multitude.' [Tagore (1988 b: 25)]

The tendency to see Tagore in soft, dulcet terms has persisted, almost doggedly. Many neglect to see that he had 'flint and iron in him, he had characters'. One of his modern biographies succinctly points out the trenchant critic in him:

> Obviously the Nobel Committee of 1913 had not the foggiest notion that in far off Bengal Tagore was a polemical critic of religious, social and political orthodoxy, and by no means friendly to the government. If they had read his Bengali essays, they would not have given him the Nobel Prize. [Dutta and Robinson (1998: 185)]

It is conjectured that in these days, Tagore the essayist would have been preferred over Tagore the poet for the Nobel, particularly ever since a friend of the Late Alfred Nobel revealed that Nobel was an anarchist in his views, and by mentioning 'idealist leaning' as a qualification for the award, he would have meant a critical attitude to religion, royalty, marriage, social order generally. Dario Fo, honoured in the teeth of opposition from the Vatican is one such example of the prize being given to a writer expressing such an attitude.

It is this preoccupation with a 'softer/sweeter' Tagore that may explain the binary opposites which beset his reception in the west—a chorus of adoration of the unfathomable spirituality of his poetry: shrill denunciation and neglect. This image tends to get reinforced by the scheme of translation which has yet to produce a comprehensive rendering of the body of his socio-economic writings into English:

> To those who do not read Bengali, Tagore is exclusively a literary person or a mystic of sorts. The fact that some two-thirds of his writings are serious essays, mostly on socio-economic problems of India and the crisis of civilization has been more or less ignored in Tagore Scholarship. [Raychaudhuri (1999: 141-142)]

Moreover, his personality like the times he lived in, does not yield to easy categorization. The University of Oxford used the phrase, 'myriad mindedness' for him, in its citation while honouring him with a degree in 1940. His myriad mindedness—reflected in the variety of his writings/interviews/correspondence—forms the underpinning of his work, and is an essential considerable for an analysis.

Tagore closely followed the major trends of science and apart from his long association with the redoubtable J.C. Bose, had many an occasion to interact with scientists. His meetings with Einstein, particularly that of 1930, is the object of much speculation and draws attention to the profundity of the discussion between the two men. An account of Einstein's discussions with Tagore during that meeting concerning the reality and the relationship of determinism to free will, appeared in the *New York Times*, wetted by Einstein, and is also mentioned in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in its biographical note on Einstein, and also in some of his major biographies. Brian Josephson, a Nobel Laureate in physics at Cambridge University, commented: 'Tagore is I think, saying That truth is a subtler concept then Einstein realises'. A brief extract as in Home and Robinson (1995: 167-179) is presented:

E : There are two different conceptions about the nature of the universe—the world as a unity dependent on humanity, and the world as reality independent of the human factor...

T : This world is a human world—the scientific view of it is also that of the scientific man. Therefore, the world apart from us does not exist; it is a relative world, depending for its reality upon our consciousness.

A little later, Einstein took up the point again:

E : Truth, then, or beauty, is not independent of man?

T : No.

E : If there were no human beings any more, the Apollo Belvedere no longer would be beautiful?

T : No

E : I agree with regard to this conception of beauty, but not with regard to truth.

T : Why not? Truth is realised through men.

...[Einstein asserted]

'I cannot prove, but I believe in the Pythagorean argument, that the truth is independent of human beings', and Tagore countered with a reference to ancient Indian philosophy, to 'Brahman, the absolute truth, which cannot be conceived by the isolation of the individual mind or described in words, but can be realised only by merging the individual in its infinity, Einstein became more concrete:

E : The mind acknowledges realities outside of it, independent of it. For instance, nobody may be in this house, yet the table remains where it is.

T : Yes, it remains outside the individual mind, but not the universal mind. The table is that which is perceptible by some kind of consciousness we possess.

E : If nobody were in the house the table would exist all the same, but this is already illegitimate from your point of view, because we can not explain what it means... we attribute to truth a superhuman objectivity. It is indispensable for us—this reality which is independent of our existence and our experience and our mind—though we cannot say what it means.

T : In any case, if there be any truth absolutely unrelated to humanity, then for us it is absolutely non existing.

This conversation highlights Tagore's unflinching humanism, besides some complex physical/metaphysical issues. It can be correlated to many contemporary developments in science, notably physics. Ilya Prigogine, a Nobel Laureate in Chemistry stated clearly: Curiously enough, the present evolution of science is running in the direction stated by the great Indian poet'. [Prigogine and Stengers (1984: 293)] This belief of Tagore in 'Man', forms the core of his views on industrialization. It also raised questions relating to the material/spiritual aspect of life; and it would also make it impossible for him to take extreme positions. The question of means and ends were very important for him as they were to Gandhi.

Tagore's Distrust of Extremism

Tagore's distrust of extremism, besides enveloping his sociopolitical

ideas, spilled over to his aesthetic sensibility as well. His emphasis on controlled expression was legendary. His profoundest thoughts are reflected in carefully worded expositions. In his letter to his son-in-law Narendranath Gangulee, Tagore (1997: 70) cautions against excitable writing besides being a comment on a dominant trend in contemporary prose:

> One never comes across such melodramatic elements in literary writing by superior authors. Balance and restraint are the hall-marks of the finest literary expression. The explicit and violent expression of strong emotion is inappropriate.... They are only found in advertisements—where writers need to shout—but in literature they are completely out of place.... The results of this are usually adverse: when style is overemphasized, emotional impact is actually diminished.

Nationalism and Tagore

This restraint is visible in his stand on the debates on nationalism, perhaps more than anything else. In 1918, as he planned to leave for a lecture tour in the USA, faced with the imminent death of his daughter Bela, he learnt that he had been accused—in the American press—of having supported extremist attempts to incite violence in India, during his American tour of 1916-1917, when in fact he had strongly condemned chauvinistic nationalism and attracted strong criticism for doing so. He cancelled his proposed visit to America and in scathing letters among others to President Woodrow Wilson, denied all such charges, further reiterating his stand on the explosive issue of nationalism, especially significant in the context of the ongoing war:

> It is needless to tell you that I do not believe in patriotism which can ride rough shod over higher ideals of humanity, and I consider it to be an act of impiety against our own country when any service is offered to her which is loaded with secret lies and dishonest deeds of violence. I have been outspoken enough in my utterances when my country needed them, and I have taken upon myself the risk of telling unwelcome truths to my own countrymen as well as to the rulers of my country. [Tagore (1997: 199)]

Many such unwelcome truths were uttered by him to his countrymen over the course of years; many a time even to Gandhi, expressing his reservations about some of the policies of the Mahatma, who to his credit always responded with the greatest of grace and sincerity. In fact, Gandhi's celebrated statement of letting the 'cultures of all the lands' blow about his house, was prefixed with a sentence hardly

ever quoted: 'I hope I am as great a believer in free air as the great Poet'. [Gandhi (1965): xx: 159] This was in response to Tagore's remonstrance during the non-cooperation movement and its degeneration into social boycott at certain places (without Gandhi's consent and of which he had had no apprehension before): 'We have no word for 'Nation' in our language. When we borrow this word from other people, it never fits us.' (*Ibid:*538).

Earlier, *Ghare Baire* was written mainly as a critique of the Swadeshi movement, against what Tagore perceived to be its destructive/negative character—manifested in its social coercion—enmeshing themes of aggressive mobilization and communal confrontation. For Tagore, it was tantamount to a defeat for the national cause if the movement for liberation ignored the sacrosanct rights of the individual to choose his/her own way. In those charged times, the novel and its author became extremely unpopular. It is worth mentioning how a prominent subalternist has appreciated his courage of conviction:

> That head wound (of Nikhilesh) was a metaphor for the author's own battered reputation of 1908. For the fate of Nikhilesh reflected his own predicament of the Savadeshi days, when like his noble but thoroughly misunderstood hero, he too had courted unpopularity by refusing to conform. (Guha 1998: 109-110)

Throughout his life, Tagore—the poet at heart—tried to reconcile the meditative and the activist aspects of his life. Any post colonial critique of his philosophy, should never lose sight of that. Said has offered fulsome tribute to 'his great lectures called Nationalism', and hailed Tagore's effort to provide a creative solution to the 'divisiveness produced by racial consciousness'—an evidence that 'at its best nationalist resistance to imperialism was always critical of itself'. [Said (1994: 259, 264)]

Measured by canonical literary standards, Tagore's writings would constitute great literature because of the experiential content of his concepts. After all literature is not merely a communication of concept, but of experience. The writings of Tagore are not a kind of arid theorization of seemingly profound concepts, but an exploration into living ideas: a journey of the soul, throbbing with empathy for the voiceless, drawing sustenance from a tradition devoid of rancour.

There is no place in his writings for chauvinism and for designs of hegemony. Tagore is concerned with the inner life of man of which, he believes, the outer life is just an extension. Man's inner

life has to change for the better, if the world he inherits is to become a better place. It is understandable that the social sciences are occasionally perplexed at this orientation to his thought, for the analysis of which contemporary social sciences have hardly equipped themselves. But it would be vain for them to attack something which strictly for them, is nebulous; as a modern singer had advised in a different context:

> "And don't criticize
> What you can't understand". (Dylan, "The Times They Are A Changing")

Religious writing of Tagore, offers great depths to the perceptive critic, and yields great rewards to a patient, attuned study. The over arching question of social analysis of religion is lucidly answered in Toynbee (1995: 348):

> The social critique of religion is justified on its own social ground; yet it misses its mark if it tries to apply the same argument to the personal field of spiritual experience and endeavour.... The personal belief in transcendence—in an ultimate spiritual reality—cannot be attacked with weapons drawn from the armoury of social criticism.

The deep ore of the social and the historical; the contemplative and the interrogative, that run through Tagore's writings, constitutes its relevance for contemporaenity, and for the challenges of the future brought through times which have become restive. After all, as remarked in Hobsbawm (2002: 151), 'Can humanity live without the ideals of freedom and justice, or without those who devote their lives to them? Or perhaps even without the memory of those who did so in the twentieth century?'

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NOTES

1. For details see Espmark (1991).

2. I am indebted for this piece of information to Ramachandra Guha. In his article, "Journals of Opinion", Guha writes:

'I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any'. These lines, attributed to Gandhi, are engraven in school and college buildings across the land. Emblematic of a once dominant (and now threatened) strand of Indian nationalism, they have recently acquired a fresh lease of life outside this country. Thus Gandhi's words have been cited in the debates on curriculum reform in the divided campuses of elite American universities. They are, it appears, an argumen-clinching mantra for our multicultural times. How many of those who quote these words here or there know how they came to be uttered: In truth, they were squeezed out of a reluctant Mahatma by Rabindranath Tagore. For Gandhi had started this particular argument as a cultural nationalist... and also a political authoritarian who commanded all patriots to take up non-cooperation and a daily round at the *charkha.* Where countless others signed up, unthinkingly, Tagore opposed both the project and the ideals behind it... A wounded Gandhi thereupon pointed out that 'I hope I am as great a believer in free air as the great Poet. I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the land to blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any'... I cannot recall, in the dozens of times I have had the words thrown at me, a single occasion on which the critical first sentence has also been included: *'I hope I am as great a believer in free air as the great Poet.'* see Guha (2004).