Tagore, Poet and Humanist

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There are many aspects of Indian culture which deserve to be more widely known, aspects which are interesting in themselves and of considerable relevance to us all in the struggle to create a culture adequate to the needs of the world today. Rabindranath Tagore as a poet and humanist is widely known as a name, but generally as little more. His achievement is however so vital and so far-reaching that we can all profit by considering and studying it. I have called him poet because I think that his poetry lies at the core of his work, but since it was 'poetry as activity,' to use a phrase of Tristan Tzara, it spreads into other spheres, ultimately into all spheres of human activity. The way in which Tagore followed up the forces radiating from his poetry and developed a many-sided expression without ever losing touch with the central impulse makes him in many respects an exemplary figure for us all, whatever national culture we work in. His many-sidedness becomes a powerful protest against the fragmentation of modern man, an expression of human wholeness and a demonstration of the ways in which creativeness can invade every sphere without dissipating itself or losing its grasp of the essential goals.

Early on, he realised that India was in the throes of a new birth, throwing off the constricting pressures of foreign domination and of backward elements in its own cultural inheritance. He knew that he was present at the first stages of the resurrection of a whole people and felt the stirring possiblities for his own art as a responsibility from which he must never swerve. To develop his individual powers was to put them at the service of the vast and difficult historical process he saw opening up. From the outset of his career—and he began very early as a poet—he strove to absorb all that was greatest and most significant in the Indian cultural tradition, to absorb and revalue it. He sought always for the essentially human aspects in the thought and feeling of that tradition, the aspects which were still alive and impacted on the present situation, and which had the potentiality of moving into the future as a liberating force. He drove his roots deep into his

home-soil, using his poetic intuition and his philosophic understanding to grasp that element in his people's culture, past and present, which was humanist, which could expand freely and generously, breaking through all bonds that tethered men to limited or sectarian ends. He never paused in seeking for the definitions and expressions which kept a maximum link with the deeply-rooted heritage and which yet at the same time freed men into the quest for a new and enriched brotherhood and happiness.

For this reason he drew all his life profoundly on the people and their culture. He drew on the Vaishnava poems which for centuries had played a powerful part, in Bengal as elsewhere, in cementing popular culture, in enabling people to maintain under crushingly difficult conditions their spiritual heritage, their deepest hopes, their warm love of life. But he drew also on the whole folk culture of Bengal, on the folksongs of the villagers, in which many valuable elements from the higher levels of past civilisations, filtering down, had stably settled. He felt a complete kinship with the folksongs in their sensuous color and direct emotion, their tragic and humorous qualities, their strong feeling for nature in their invocations of the powers of the earth, the air, and the water. Always his spirit lingered, as he put it in *Gitanjali*, 'Where the tiller is tilling the land and the path-maker is breaking the stones.'

But besides Vaishnavism and folksong he drew also on popular Buddhism and Hinduism, vividly alive as they were among the peasants of Bengal. In his dramas, if from one angle he looked to Kalidasa and Shakespeare, he was also remembering the *Jatras*, the itinerant companies who sang and acted, the *kavidal* or poet groups with question and answer in verse, the village shows with episodes from the stories of Rama or of Krishna. Nor did the folk-element weaken with the years. In later plays in prose, which begin with *Autumn Festival* in 1908, wild revellers become a constant feature, sweeping in with their nature-drunken songs.

I am not trying to limit Tagore's sources to these popular elements. A fine scholar, he was versed in the Upanishads, in Kalidasa and Kabir, in the whole of his poetic inheritance from Sanskrit days onwards, as well as in many important aspects of European literature, finding affinities perhaps especially in Shelley and Keats. And he drew on many contemporary movements, from the neo-bhakti cult of Chaitanya to the Baul cult with its fight against caste, image-worship and sectarianism. But I feel that we do not err if we consider the folk-elements of supreme importance in the formation of his outlook and method.

In the popular culture of Bengal then, Tagore had a basis to which he could continually return in his long and fertile life as a poet: a basis which could not fail him and to which he remained throughout true. There lay the source of his strength, his energies of self-renewal, his consistent love of life and his unbreakable faith in man.

But though the lyric poet who composed over two thousand songs seems to me the deepest aspect of Tagore, the link which his deep feeling gave him with his people in their pangs of growth, their sufferings and their aspirations, ensured that he would be much more than a lyric poet, that he would seek to dramatise the situation and to set it out in novels, that he would seize every possible form and occasion for presenting the human

scene in all its fullness and complexity. Hence the way in which he proceeded to create artworks and to put his ideas into action on a wide front, as poet, dramatist, storyteller, novelist, artist, actor, singer, composer, philosopher, journalist, critic, publicist, administrator, educationalist, and founder of the Bolpur school which became the nucleus of an international university. The mere listing of his activities shows that we have to deal with a man resolutely opposed to all modern trends of departmentalism, crippling specialisation, fragmentation of the life-process through the rigid division of labour. Tagore's lyrical gifts and his need to find concentrated symbols for the high moments of choice were balanced by his desire to achieve a clear realistic representation of what was going on in the everyday world of men, in the general movement of society. In his poems and plays he tackled many aspects or facets of experience; he found that the necessary complement of his intense delight in life, in the ever-renewed sense of communion with nature, lay in a readiness to attack without fear of consequences everything which clouded or denied happiness and harmony in relationship. This attack he carried out alike in tragic symbolism and in sharp precise satire. The play *Sacrifice* is an example of the first method, with its bitter assault on bigotry and the cult of power—ending in the tragic disillusion of Raghupati before the idol of violence.

> Look how she stands there, the silly stone, —dead, dumb, blind— the whole sorrowful world weeping at the door, —the noblest hearts wrecking themselves at her stony feet.

But the beggar-girl, whose pet goat he had taken for Kali's service, brings to him the warm sanctities of human love.

As an example of the second method we may take *Signs of Progress*, from *Kalpana*, written 1897-9, in which the poet sees an obsequious crowd waiting. Is it some great national hero that has drawn all the notables? No, 'the sahib who has stuffed his pockets and his belly is going. All these great folk have come to set up his statue and grieve.' Next appears a miserable neglected man. What sin is he expiating? This: he is a poet who has crowned his motherland with deathless praise. Again we see the Durga *Pujā*, the worship of the national goddess. A mob of poor onlookers are driven away. Why? The businessmen and shopkeepers 'have brought their lotus-feet with vast pomp to the *Pujā*.' The poem ends with a satire on two contrasted but equally wrong-headed ways of tackling the cultural problem. First the patriots, dressed up in European clothes, conduct their meetings in English; then a meek shaven pandit explains complacently how all modern science is hidden and anticipated in the Hindu scriptures and customs, while his educated audience listen in rapt agreement.

But Tagore also felt the need to go further and turn to prose narrative in order to define the main types of the emerging middle and lower-middle class in Bengal. His deep sense of the positive elements of Indian culture was bound up with his indignant insight into the forces that were holding progress back; and he never hesitated to denounce uncompromisingly where he encountered the rule of egoism, inhumanity, sectarianism, money-values, and parasitism. In his novels he strove to set out the full perspective

of his world, with all its range of good and evil—its men and women fighting for light and freedom or obstructing the advance. He had a profound feeling for that in men and women which seeks truth and goodness; and he saw the individual quests cohering in a collective movement towards human unity—towards the free developments of the most truly human characteristics. But he also saw in the social scene all that was petty, pretentious, false, parochial, corrupt: all the weak mendicant elements bred by the helpless centuries. He set himself to depict the peculiar atmosphere of tension, the prolonged pangs of difficult growth, the whole vast tangle of Indian custom and religion in a process of upheaval and change, confused and powerful and unceasing, under the European impact. And he was able to grasp the underlying pattern because of his sure sense of values, his intuitive and philosophic penetration into essentials. He could estimate the huge oppressive burden of the past because of his clear faith in the future, his definite vision of its contours.

Mulk Raj Anand has claimed that it is with Tagore the Indian novel becomes mature, breaks from folk or medieval bases of story-telling and recital, and achieves the particular density of psychological apprehension which constitutes the novel proper. To make this claim for him is not to belittle the important preparatory work of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, which at its best has no doubt a greater vigour than Tagore achieved in his prose. Tagore is able to create his fuller and more complex picture precisely because of his greater clarity as to the pattern of movement involved; he sees the present in a wider perspective because he sees also the future travailing inside it. We may add that he owns the gift of maintaining humour in the midst of tragic tension; and that he gives us a wide gallery of Indian types—in his tenderhearted women, his fine old men, his earnest students, his Europeanised philistines. In prose as in verse he has a specially strong feeling for the lot of women. He had shown it early in such explicit forms as the pathetically ironic *Loving Conversation of a Newly-Wedded Bengali Couple*, with its scathing picture of child-marriage; and his novels are rich in feminine portraits.

> Who among us (asks Anand) has created that eternal type of the Indian mother as is Anandamoi in *Gora*? or that selfsacrificing devoted girl who tames the priggish Gour Mohan in the same novel? Even Bimala the sincere muddled wife of the liberal landlord Nikhil, in the *Home and the World*, is relieved in her blind and foolish worship of the manoeuvering firebrand Sandip by the gentle and constant devotion she gives to an ideal. And the village-girl in the *Wreck* shines like a flame in the face of all the oppression of society, forcing the hedonist lover, Ramesh, to respect her even as he longs for his beloved girl graduate from Calcutta. To the end this kind of woman recurs in Tagore's novels: the typical Indian woman, whom Tagore brings before us, sometimes shrill, sometimes gentle and devoted, and always saying: 'I want, I want,' but challenging us, almost accusing us, with the words: 'I constitute one-half of Indian civilisation—the suppressed half.'

It will be clear by now that Tagore's return to the people, his reintegration of the arts and his great range of activities, cannot be considered apart from what I have given as his third main characteristic—his unslackening quest for a new way of life. For here was the dynamic element which bound all his multifarious activities into a living whole and drove him passionately forward. He was always acutely aware of the dilemma of an India poised between old immemorial ways and the disturbing forces of Europe. With all his love for Indian tradition, he never faltered in his respect for the positive elements of Western achievement—though he brought his own critical focus to bear on that achievement, in order to sort out what was positive and valuable from what was deadly and disintegrative. He threw aside many of the ideas and methods of which Europe was proud, and he saw a great spiritual revolution at work in many things which the West itself considered merely material. He was simultaneously a Vaishnavist poet experiencing a rapturous union with all things living, with the whole of creation, and a keen scientist looking to Darwin for his secure understanding of man's place on earth. He saw the limitations of much European science and he wholly rejected the way of life based on the cash-nexus, on turning men into things in a world of fragmented labour. To all questions, Western or Eastern, he brought his touchstone of brotherhood, love, truth.

These may seem large and loose terms; but with Tagore they remain concrete because he is always concerned with definite and real relationships. He does not put the abstractions in the place of reality. Let us take a few of his characteristic utterances:

> Egoism is the very root of all sin and suffering, and it can be liquidated only by the feeling of *Maitri*, fraternity, towards the universe . . . Whenever our life is stirred to its depths by Truth, it succeeds in expressing energy in all departments. Then our life comes to be filled, as it were, with a creative ardour.

A passage that succinctly brings out the way he relates brotherhood, community with nature, truth, and creativeness. Such a relating could remain vague, but Tagore's fierce concern for mankind and for India saved him from becoming lost in overlarge concepts. 'Life is being constantly bled white for swelling the girth of that which is not life, which is against life.' There is always an undeceived clarity at the back of his mind.

> The cult of riches is inequality. Knowledge, religion, art, all this can be shared and enjoyed; it is not thereby reduced. But money is to be earned by exploiting others, and it is to be safeguarded by denying others. Thence, those who desire wealth, create poverty in their own interests. . . . When that inequality assumes a dangerous form, the capitalists want merely to ward off the danger by fair means or foul. Hence in the West the more the working class asserts itself, the more it is deceived by a lullaby; attempts made to deceive it by small crumbs of favour.

That passage will suffice to show the realistic application of his ideas. I do not mean that his formulations are all beyond criticism, any more than one

could deny the weaknesses of his verse, a cloudy diffuseness at times, an overgeneralised image of nature. But I would claim that his thinking throughout moves along humanist lines, that at all crucial points he is true to his humanism, and that from start to finish we see a genuine struggle to transform Indian culture by achieving a maximum concentration of humanist emotion and thought without losing touch with traditional bases, with the people. I could cite many instances of his clear uncompromising judgement in the face of events—from his 1905 call to the students to go into the villages, to organise and educate there: 'show them how to put forward their united strength', to his calm and anguished statement on the war of 1940:

> It is now no longer possible for us to retain any respect for that mockery of civilisation which believes in ruling by force and has no faith in freedom at all. . . . Today my one hope is that the deliverer will be born in this poverty-striken country.

But I have said enough to show how his humanism was compounded of broad moral concepts and a clear-eyed recognition of the real world in all its confusion and complexity, and yet in its stark essential patterns. There is, however, a further point about his philosophic outlook which I should like to glance at, since it involves the method that gives vitality and stability to his poetry, his plays, his novels. This is his strong dialectical grasp of the life-process. In *My Reminscences* he says:

> As in all creation, so in poetry, there is the opposition of forces. If the divergence is too wide, or the unison too close, there is, it seems to me, no room for poetry. Where the pain of discord strives to attain and express its resolution into harmony, there does poetry break forth into music, as breath through a flute.

He sees in all process two contradictory forces. It is the contradiction, the finger striking the strings, that produces music. 'When only one predominates, there is the sterility of silence.' With his detestation of power-politics he fought the attempts to turn Kali-worship into nation-worship, yet he could write: 'When love and force do not go together, then love is mere weakness and force is brutal. Peace becomes death when it is alone, war becomes a demon when it destroys its mate.' He saw life as fulfilling itself in rebellion. The individual must ceaselessly go out from self into a fuller life, from which he returns enriched into himself; freedom lies in ceaselessly deepening the harmony of relationship. Always the stress is on relationship, on process. 'I must come out of the life of habit, the life of compromise, the life of self.'

On these lines he worked out his ideas of the dialectical unity of East and West, of Indian culture and Western science; his ideas of the resolution between Indian universalism of outlook and the many narrow sectarian divisions limiting and distorting its application. Pain and joy he saw as necessary elements in experiences—the conflict ended by joy's triumphant renewal transformation of life.

> The fact that we exist has its truth in the fact that everything else does exist, and the 'I am' in me finds its finitude whenever it deeply realises it in the 'thou art.' This crossing of the limit produces joy, the joy that we have in beauty, in love, in greatness.

Man is one with nature, but he has separated himself out and must perpetually realise afresh his union with nature's embosoming life. Tagore was deeply aware of the difference between the Indian feeling for nature and the European. 'The West,' he said, 'seems to take a pride in thinking that it is subduing nature, as if we were living in a hostile world where we have to wrest everything we want from an unwilling and alien arrangement of things.' The Indian, in comparison, was unalienated from nature and did not need this aggressive approach.

Yet Tagore confronted the full situation: man's separation as well as his unity with nature. One of his greatest expressions here is the poem *Sea Waves*, written on the loss of a pilgrim-ship with 800 passengers in 1887. The musical energy of the original is lost in translation, but even so, one can feel the flurrying fury and sweep, the tormented rush and recoil, the escalating tension, the profound image of man lost in elemental fury yet preserving intact his spirit of love. 'The mother leaps to destruction. Why to her breast does she still clasp her child?' One is uncannily reminded of Hopkins' *Wreck*, composed on a similar occasion, a poem more richly extended than Tagore's and which reaches the same dialectical conclusion, but with the aid of otherworldly imagery. For Tagore the resolution is purely human.

> Love comes and draws to the breast, banishing all fear.
> Of two Gods is this the eternal double sport,
> breaking and building?
> Ever unendingly, victory ever, and ever defeat?

And this brings me to my final point: the way in which Tagore used traditional themes and god-imagery of Hinduism, but cut the themes and the images clean away from all pietistic bases. He changed mythology into humanism. He creates a rich pantheon to symbolise his own inner struggles and the changes rending his people; but he removed the otherworldly connections and thus built the bridge between India's religious past and its humanist future. At the same time he sought to remove the obstructing and divisive factors inside Indian universalism, and to enable India to play her full part in the cultural comity of nations. In that part I believe there must loom large the gentleness, the tolerance, the acceptance of variety-in-unity and unity-in-variety, and the deep unalienated sense of community with nature, which were components of his message.

> It has been my life's work to try restore the fullness of life to those of my race who have been deprived of their own proper share of physical and intellectual opportunities and to open the inner path of communication with other nations for the purpose of establishing perfect human relationship which is the real goal of civilisation.

And he put it thus in *Gitanjali*:

> Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
> where knowledge is free;
> where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
> where words come from the depths of truth;
> where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
> where the clear steam of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
> where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought
> and action—
> into the heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.[1]

That formulation perhaps reveals both his strength and his weaknesses. But however we may assess in detail those strengths and weaknesses, we must admit the remarkable degree to which he integrated a complex set of activities inside a great and dynamic purpose, a vision which set up a steady tension between the actual world, realised in its good and its evil, and the concept of human unity. The result was to place the actual world in the stark light of a Day of Judgement and to make the concept of unity concrete, linked at every point with the real potentialities of men. And so Tagore becomes himself the integrated man of the humanist future which he seeks to build. His many-sided unity becomes the pledge of the world to be, the world of human unity in which the fragmentations, distortions and contradictions that dominate our societies of the cash-nexus are all ended. Thus he appears as a portent of equal significance to non-Indians as to Indians. In many ways he is close to William Morris, but he is a Morris set in the Indian situation with its special and enormous possibilities, its tumultuous concatenation of diverse forces. This particular situation increases the fascination of his struggle to gather those forces in a new valid unity, but it does not lessen the relevance of Tagore's life and work to the situation in countries with a very different tradition.[2]

Notes

1. In English Tagore has weakened the last line, which in the original runs literally: 'Strike, Father! Strike with thine own hand! Into that heaven wake this Indian land.'

2. This essay is based on the lecture I gave at the Tagore Centenary Celebrations in London on 6th May, 1961. I must once again acknowledge my debt to my friend Mulk Raj Anand for interesting me in Tagore and for helping me to reach such understanding of him as I possess. Anand is himself the outstanding example of an Indian writer who has carried on Tagore's work.

Tagore was acclaimed early by Yeats and by Pound ('the sense of charm is the subtle underflow,' *Fortnightly Review*, March 1913). Most English writers on him have tended to stress his links with English Romanticism: E.

Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore*, Oxford, 1948; W. B. Yeats, *Introduction to Gitanjali*; also see A. Aronson, *Rabindranath Tagore through Western Eyes*, Allahabad, 1943; A. Shanane, *Studies in Romanticism*, V. 53-64. Tagore himself tells of his early love of Shakespeare, Byron, Shelley, Browning, Milton, (*Reminiscences*, New York, 1917), and stresses art as the movement of Truth in the Keatsian sense of Truth and Beauty (*Art and Aesthetics*, ed. Prithwish Neogy, Delhi, 1961). He also admired Whitman (*Personality*, New York, 1917). But the first and last word must go to his Bengali and Sanskrit roots.